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JULY


MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

IN THIS ISSUE—THREE EXCITING NOVELETS

CAUSE FOR MURDER

A NEW MIKE SHAYNE THRILLER

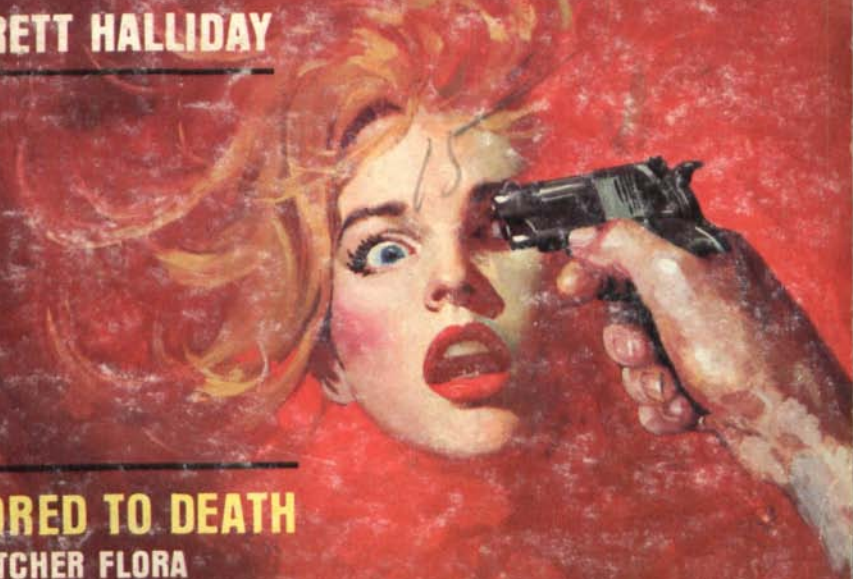
By BRETT HALLIDAY

TUTORED TO DEATH

By FLETCHER FLORA

SOME DAY THEY'LL KILL HER

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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY, 1969

VOL. 25, NO. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

CAUSE FOR MURDER

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

He was through, without hope. Death by flame—or hanging—one way or the other he was done. Could Mike Shayne free a twice-doomed man—with one deadly gamble left?

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Headlining

MIKE SHAYNE



CAUSE FOR MURDER

He staggered out of a flaming murder trap—a trap that held a dead man—and straight into a hangman's noose. Could Mike Shayne free him—while there was yet time?



by BRETT HALLIDAY

MORGAN CITY is a somnolent inland town some forty miles north of Miami. A backwater town of agriculture and small industry which had existed for a hundred years outside the modern world. But the modern world reached out to Morgan City, and the town was no longer sleepy this third week in May.

Tension hung over the city. The farm owners gathered in angry groups in the wide, southern-town

square. The workers at the cannery, at the frozen-food plant, seethed like a sea of anger. The city police, and the county sheriff's men, roamed the streets with hard, alert eyes.

Everyone in Morgan City waited nervously.

At the heart of the ominous cloud was the Negro ghetto on the west side of the city. Civil rights, hate, and agitation had finally arrived in Morgan City. The explosion of the

black majority was about to erupt into violence.

It came on a hot Wednesday in May.

Slowly, as all explosions begin, policemen stopped a car full of black youths. The police were nervous; they acted too strongly. The youths resisted, outraged, and one was shot in the leg.

A crowd gathered swiftly.

A rally of Ku Klux Klansmen was held in the town square. Black youths heckled. A fight began.

The two crowds merged in the ghetto, and the riot was on.

The police, sheriff's men, and state troopers moved into the riot area. Fires began to burn. Shops were smashed. Houses were attacked. Looting became universal.

One hour after the first rumbling of the riot, a small grocery store in the heart of the white-owned business section of the ghetto was torn asunder by a bomb. It blew out in a mound of glass and debris, and then began to burn.

The police, the sheriff's men, civil rights leaders, and some of the vigilante types gathered at the store moments after it exploded. They arrived so swiftly for a simple reason—this particular store was under constant scrutiny because its part-owner was a local White Citizen's leader, a man long hated by the angry blacks.

As the law gathered, while the dust of the explosion was still in the air, and the fire only just begun, a man staggered out of the wreck. A

black man. He was well-dressed, young, with a vigorous and angry face, and he came running from the demolished shop.

He was captured instantly.

"Hold him," the sheriff said grimly.

"Okay, Jones," the sheriff's first deputy said; "you just stand quiet now."

"I didn't blow it, Mingo," Rafe Jones said quietly. "I went in to see if any of our people were in there."

"Then you got no worries," Deputy Joe Mingo said.

"Come on, Mingo," the sheriff said.

Mingo followed his boss into the burning store as the fire department arrived, and the street began to fill with the mob. For a time nothing else happened except that the police faced the angry mob, reinforcements arrived, and slowly the streets in the immediate area began to be cleared.

Then Sheriff McBean came out of the building. He looked around at the mob, saw it was under control, and walked slowly to where Rafe Jones was held by the city police. The sheriff looked Jones straight in the eye.

"You've had it, boy," Sheriff McBean said.

"I told you I didn't set that bomb," Jones said.

"Maybe you did, maybe you didn't," Sheriff McBean said, and slowly he grinned a cold grin. "It don't matter. Matt Snell's in there, Jones. He's dead, just like you said

he was gonna be, and it wasn't the explosion."

"What was it?" Rafe Jones said quietly.

"Snell's been stabbed, Jones. Stabbed dead. He been murdered, boy, and you was the only one come out of that store."

"I didn't kill Snell," Rafe Jones said. "I didn't even see him in there. Only you won't believe that. You got what you always wanted—a way to stop me fighting. Right, Sheriff?"

"Yeah, boy, I got what I wanted. There ain't no way you get out of this now. This ain't civil rights, boy. This is just plain, old-fashioned murder."

"And my motive?" Jones said.

"Hate, boy, just simple hate. You're dead, boy!"

The crowd melted away under the police pressure, unaware that Rafe Jones, one of their leaders, was being led away through safe back alleys to stand trial for simple murder.

By morning the riot was over. The ghetto smoldered, smoke drifted, the black citizens sat in their homes waiting for what would come next, and the personnel of the law patrolled.

In jail, Rafe Jones talked to his lawyer. The lawyer listened, grew quieter and quieter, and when he left he was as grim as he had ever been. The lawyer, Marcus Clay, went to his office, and he began making telephone calls far beyond Morgan City.

Soon the whole country knew that Rafe Jones, well-known civil

rights militant leader, was in jail in Morgan City, charged with murder.

II

MIKE SHAYNE came into his office that morning with his mind working on the case of embezzlement he had been handed by his New York insurance company employers. It meant a trip out of Miami, and he did not want to make the trip just now.

Lucy Hamilton looked up as he came in. "Tim Rourke wants to see you, Michael. He's on his way over."

"Shoo him in when he gets here, Angel," Shayne said, his mind still on the embezzlement. "And get me the airline schedule for all points in Mexico from New Orleans."

He went on into his private office without waiting for Lucy to answer. The brown-eyed girl would do her work with speed and efficiency, and Shayne was free to concentrate on his real work. He was still concentrating on the air schedule to various points in Mexico, when Tim Rourke came in.

"I need you, Mike," the lean reporter said, and slumped his elongated frame into the chair that faced Shayne's desk.

"Any time, Tim," Shayne said, and leaned back to listen to what his reporter friend had to tell him.

"You heard about the riot up in Morgan City last night?"

"No," Shayne said. "I've been busy. Why should I have heard? We

get riots every day these days. What's special about this riot?"

"Two things," Rourke enumerated. "First, riots just don't usually happen in places like Morgan City, where the local sheriff has a stranglehold on everyone and everything. It's a tight, tight town out of the last century, and everyone knows his place."

"Who's the sheriff again?"

"McBean. Alistair McBean. In twenty years, just about runs the county to suit himself. Even the state police step softly up there."

"I know McBean," Shayne said drily. "If he had a riot, it must have taken a lot of guts and organization. It's a hell of a risk to riot against McBean."

"It took big guts, and big organization, and big arrogance, Mike. All of that was supplied by a Black Power council headed by a young militant named Rafe Jones. Jones is a local Morgan City boy who went away to get educated and learn what's going on in the world, and then came back a year ago to lead the fight in Morgan City. He's pretty well-known outside Florida, but up in Morgan City he's been in trouble ever since he got back."

"That's no big surprise, Tim. Anyone like that would be in trouble in Morgan City."

Rourke frowned. "Sure they would, but Rafe Jones is a pretty special case himself. He's arrogant, Mike, and not a very diplomatic man. He makes pretty wild statements,

and believes in pushing hard—maybe too hard. He's a hundred percent militant."

"You said there were two special things about the Morgan City riot?" Shayne said.

"The second is Rafe Jones himself, Mike. They've got him charged with murder."

"He killed someone in the riot?"

"It happened during the riot, but they've got a Murder One charge against him. They're claiming a premeditated, personal murder, with the riot only a cover."

"You mean they're trying to say he used the riot to hide a private killing?"

"That's it," Rourke said. "McBean's given the story out to all the wire services, with witnesses and all, in an attempt to head off any cries of political involvement."

"It won't work."

"Not to the militants in the rest of the country, maybe, but it'll carry weight in Florida. Anyway, unless someone can prove it's a lie, the private killing part, it keeps the case a local police matter with no Federal help."

Shayne rubbed at his gaunt jaw. He studied the elongated form of his reporter friend. Rourke was uneasy and unhappy. There was more to the matter than Rourke had said so far.

"What do you want me to do, Tim?"

Rourke stood, began to pace. "Look, Mike, the paper is in a bind. If we say we don't believe McBean's

charge, we can be accused of being prejudiced from the start. We're a liberal paper, you know that. Normally we'd back Rafe Jones, but we've got two problems. First, we can't charge McBean with some kind of frame-up without looking over-eager on the side of the militants. Second, we don't much like Rafe Jones."

"So if you don't say McBean is playing tricks, the militant's will accuse you of having it in for Jones?"

"Jones already has. He's an arrogant big-mouth, Mike. He's done good work, but a lot of his good work is ruined by his violent hatred of all whites. He's already saying he won't get any kind of fair trial in Florida, especially from the liberal white newspapers."

"Do you like Jones yourself?"

"No, he's a punk!"

"But maybe not a killer. At least, not a premeditated killer."

"That's it. We want to know. We want you to go up for the newspaper and find out what really happened up there last night."

"It's not going to be easy in McBean's own territory. He'll run me out, Tim, if he can."

"No, not this time. The State Police have already called in Will Gentry and the Miami police as expert consultants. McBean's co-operating after a fashion."

"He must think he's got a hell of a tight case."

"Maybe he has, Mike."



There was a silence in the office. Shayne knew what was on Rourke's mind. It was a touchy matter, and men had used public action to hide private crimes before this. If Jones were guilty, a lot of people would never believe it without the fullest proof, and many not even then. If Jones were innocent, a lot of other people weren't going to believe that without total proof, and many not even then.

"We could let McBean handle it," Shayne said. "Let him get the trouble, no matter what's true."

Rourke shook his head. "No, Mike. Our paper wants the truth. We owe it to our readers, to our principles."

"We owe it to someone else, too,"

"Who's that?"

"Rafe Jones," Shayne said. "Guilty or not, he's got the cards against him. Okay, Tim, you hire me for the paper, and I'll go up there."

Rourke nodded, and started for the door. The lean reporter stopped, looked back.

"I wonder what I hope he is, Mike. If he's innocent, and you can prove it, he isn't going to change. He isn't going to be grateful. He'll go on hating us all, fighting for his rights and more."

"You don't expect a man innocent of a crime to thank you, Tim. Why should he be grateful? If he's innocent, it's his right to go free. It's no favor."

Rourke sighed, nodded slowly and left. Shayne thought for a time. Then he called Chief Will Gentry. He wasn't going alone.

III

WILL GENTRY sat beside Mike Shayne as the redhead drove up toward Morgan City. Gentry's official car, with his driver and personal assistant, Lieutenant Paul Maine, came along behind.

"If I know McBean, I won't have a lot more standing up here in Morgan City than you will, Mike," the gruff Chief of Miami Police said.

"So we'll work together," Shayne grinned. "I asked you to ride with me to fill me in on the mess. What do we have, Will?"

"Not damned much," Gentry

said, and opened his notebook. "Rafe Jones is twenty eight years old, a rabid militant. Ever since he came back to Morgan City he's been whipping up the black community to fight for their rights. He's got a record of violence, although no killings. He's spoken against shooting-type violence and killing. But his slogan is never give an inch, and always push ahead."

"None of that is unusual, Will. That's what all the black leaders think today."

"It is, and there's nothing wrong with it—except in the wrong hands. Rafe Jones can be very wrong hands. He's an arrogant, cynical man with a chip on his shoulder and a lot of pride. Too much, maybe. He thinks he's the only honest leader there is."

"Tell me about the man he's supposed to have killed."

Gentry read his notebook. "Matt Snell, from an old family gone to seed. Owned a grocery store in the ghetto section with a partner, Josh Drake. He was an ordinary guy, nothing special, until a year or so ago when he decided to oppose Rafe Jones by forming a White Citizen's Council chapter."

"He was the leader of that council?"

"Yeah, and according to the information I got from Captain Medenez of the State Police, it was more than just one group fighting another group. It seems that Snell was never especially conservative until Rafe Jones showed up in town

again. For some reason, Snell just disliked Jones personally. That's what turned Snell into an activist, his fury against Jones."

"Swell," Shayne said. "From the sound of Rafe Jones, he'd return the feeling in spades."

"He did. Only Medenez says as far as he can find out, even from Jones' worst enemies, including Sheriff McBean, Jones kept it political. Jones didn't make it a personal vendetta. Yet, things have been happening right up to the night of the riot."

"What things?"

"Shots fired at Snell's house. Attacks on Jones' home. At least two definite attempts to kill Snell: one a bomb in his car; the second a sniper shooting at him in his backyard. And a lot of threats and rumors about Snell being silenced."

"And now he has been," Shayne said grimly.

"With Jones caught running out of the bombed store, and Snell's body inside, stabbed," Gentry said. "You know, Mike, I don't hold with everything Sheriff McBean does, but he's a good cop, and he's hard but fair when it comes to criminal cases. If he says he's got a case against Jones, then he has. He'll run a vagrant or an agitator out of his county with any means he can, but I've never known him to play any way but straight on a real crime."

"Is that how Medenez feels?"

"I don't know, Mike. It's a touchy case. That's why the State

Police asked me to come up as an expert. Whichever way the cat jumps, we better have our facts solid all the way."

"Is McBean going to help us, Will?"

Gentry didn't answer for a moment. The eyes of the gruff Chief of Police were fixed on the barren road ahead that wound through the inland wastes of Central Florida. Unpainted farm houses dotted the roadside at wide intervals, and silent, impressive-faced men watched the two cars pass.

"I think he'll do his duty, Mike," Gentry said at last.

"Only what is his duty?" Shayne asked, his gray eyes fixed on the empty road ahead. "If he gets a conviction against Jones, he solves his murder, and he clears up a lot of immediate trouble in the county at the same time. Maybe he won't mean to railroad Jones, but maybe he won't be able to see the truth even if it stares him in the face."

"Then it's up to us to make sure the truth does more than just stare him in the face," Gentry said. "McBean won't frame Jones, but maybe he'll need a lot of convincing that Jones is innocent—if he is."

Shayne had no answer for that. He was thinking that it was not going to be easy to prove Jones innocent in the hostile atmosphere of Morgan City, not even for him or Gentry. He did not remember much about Morgan City, but what he remembered was not good. A dry,

dusty, drab city inhabited by dry, dusty people who lived in a past age.

The first outskirts of the town did nothing to change Shayne's memory of Morgan City. Dusty fields stretched on either side of the road, rusted farm vehicles leaned in ditches, and smoke and steam rose from the first of the canning plants.

The second canning plant appeared on the other side of the road, and the dirt factory yards and parking lots stretched desolate on both sides of the road, cluttered with boxes, waste mounds, vehicles and piles of rusted metal, just as the buildings of downtown Morgan City came into sight in the distance.

"Well," Gentry said, "I guess we go to see McBean before we do anything—"

The shots cracked out in the still inland air.

Two shots, spaced, and snapping like two dry twigs in the dusty atmosphere.

Glass shattered between Shayne and Gentry as the windshield of Shayne's car blew out.

The bullets whined between them.

Gentry went white.

Shayne jammed the brakes down, skidded off the road to the right, had his door open, and was out into the ditch. Will Gentry was out and in the ditch even before Shayne. The Chief of Police had his gun out. Shayne drew his.

"Snipers," Gentry said. "About a hundred fifty yards dead ahead to

the right of the road. That low building in the cannery yard, I figure."

"Two of them, Will," Shayne said. "The other's on top of those boxes."

Something glinted from on top of the boxes. Something moved at the glassless window of the shack in the cannery yard.

"Let's get 'em," Gentry said.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE crawled up the ditch toward the cannery yard, where the pile of boxes stood silent now in the inland sun. Gentry crawled somewhere to his right. He could not see the Chief, or any sign of movement that showed where Gentry moved.

Shayne's mouth skinned back from his teeth in a wolf grin: the snipers, whoever they were, had bitten off more than they had bargained for this time. Gentry and Shayne were not sheep ready for ambushing, but wolves who could bite back—hard.

He reached the edge of the factory yard, his gray eyes fixed on the pile of boxes. He didn't watch the window of the shack, Gentry would have that covered. He heard a faint movement to his right. Gentry was making noise—purposely.

Shayne steadied his automatic aimed at the top of the boxes. He waited. Gentry made the noise again; moved.

A shape moved on top of the

boxes, and something glinted. Shayne squeezed off two slow shots at the man who had moved to shoot at Gentry. The Chief had made the sniper expose himself.

Wood splinters flew from the boxes as Ahayne's heavy slugs struck home. There was a cry of pain, and a man appeared for a moment on top of the boxes.

But the range had been too great for a .45 automatic. The sniper was outlined against the sky for a moment, holding his hand. His rifle had fallen to the ground below the boxes. Then he was gone.

Shayne was up, chasing.

Two quick rifle shots exploded from the window of the shack.

Shayne dived and skidded in the dirt on his nose.

To the right Gentry fired four careful shots, and Shayne saw chips fly from the window of the shack. A man ran from the rear of the shack. Shayne was up again and reached the pile of boxes, went around on the run, but the factory yard beyond was empty.

He turned right and ran after the second sniper. Gentry appeared from around the shack. The two men converged in the chase. On the road Gentry's car had come up by now, and his assistant, Lieutenant Maine, was racing to cut off the fleeing sniper.

The sun glinted from something in a row of trees ahead of the running sniper.

"Down!" Gentry cried.



They went down.

Shots rang out, and bullets whined over.

To the left Lieutenant Maine dove for cover as whoever was in the row of trees fired at him.

The sniper reached the trees and vanished.

For a full minute the three pursuing detectives lay on the ground. Then Shayne raised his head. No one shot. They stood up and ran to the trees.

A narrow dirt road ran among the trees. It was empty now. A car motor faded into the distance far to the right where a dust cloud hung in the hot air.

"Missed them," Gentry said, and swore.

"You think they were actually after you Chief?"

"It was my car they shot at," Shayne pointed out.

"Maybe they were ready to shoot at any strangers," Gentry said grimly.

Before Shayne could answer that, sirens roared up along the road, and police cars squealed to quick stops. Shayne looked and saw two sheriff's cars, one city police car, and a State trooper's car. The police began to pour across the field toward where Shayne, Gentry and Maine stood.

The police fanned out on the run to cover the area. A small group came up to the three waiting visitors from Miami. In the lead was a big, sallow man with the shoulders of a bull, and a thick mustache on his heavy, pale face. Behind him, hand resting on the butt of the pistol in his holster, was a smaller man with the build of a whip—thin, hard, craggy, and all muscle.

"A little trouble, Chief?" the big man said to Gentry.

"A little welcome, I figure, Sheriff," Gentry said.

McBean, the big man, looked around with a frown on his sallow face. An anger darkened his eyes. His lips set in a hard line as he glanced back at the whip-like younger man behind him.

"Go take charge, Mingo. I want those guys," McBean said.

Shayne said, "They're gone, Sheriff, but one of them dropped his rifle. It's over near those boxes. Maybe you can trace that."

McBean stared at Shayne, said, "Mingo? You hear that? Go get the

rifle that the guy dropped and bring it here."

The lean deputy left. Sheriff McBean continued to stare at Shayne.

"You're Mike Shayne, right?"

"How do you know that, Sheriff?" Shayne asked bluntly.

"I know everything goes on up here, Shayne. You wouldn't be here long if I didn't say it was okay. That clear? They told me they were sending you up, that Miami newspaper."

"What did you say?" Shayne said.

McBean's face was impassive. "I said they could send anyone they liked. I said I don't like private peepers, but this is a special case, and I'll let anyone work on the case who's got the qualifications and keeps it in the open and legitimate. You can look all you want as long as you don't get in our way or try any cute tricks."

"Thanks," Shayne said drily.

"This is one case I want nailed down tight and clean and no doubts anywhere. You believe that, Shayne?"

Gentry said, "We believe it, Sheriff. Let's talk about these snipers. Someone doesn't want the case investigated."

McBean shrugged. "The town's got a lot of feeling runnin' high. Hotheads all over on both sides. I'm sorry it happened, but you got to expect it. The town's a powder keg—on both sides of the mess."

Shayne half listened to Sheriff McBean, and half watched the others

who had walked up with him. Two of them were city police officers in uniform. Hostility oozed from every pore of their angry bodies, and their eyes radiated dislike of Shayne and Gentry.

The third man behind McBean was a civilian. Shayne didn't know him, but Gentry did. His face was lean and swarthy, and he had been keeping a tense silence as McBean talked. Gentry now nodded to him.

"What do you say, Captain Medenez? You think the snipers were just hotheads out to stop any strangers?"

Captain Medenez of the State Police shrugged quietly. "I don't know, Chief. It could be. The situation is tense. On the other hand, someone maybe 'doesn't want an outside investigation. No offense, Sheriff, but local people might feel they will have a better chance of escaping detection if you investigated alone."

"No offense, Captain," McBean said evenly, "but if they think that, they're dead wrong—and I want everyone here to know that. This case is open and shut. I believe that, but I'm going to be damned sure I prove it so tight no court could turn it over."

Gentry said, "Tell us more about the killing."

McBean shrugged. "Nothing much to add to my report. You've all read that, I figure. Rafe Jones and Matt Snell hated each other, for a lot of reasons. Snell was out to get Jones, I

don't deny that. But Jones made more than one threat he was going to take care of Snell, and no one can deny that either.

"Snell was knifed, minutes before we caught Rafe Jones running out of that bombed store. Coroner says Snell wasn't dead five minutes. No one else came out of that store. No one else was in the store except Mrs. Snell. She was badly banged up by the explosion, out cold, and the knife was near the body, maybe thirty feet from Mrs. Snell in another room. She's alive, but she's in the hospital."

Shayne said, "She could have knifed Snell before the bomb went off, Sheriff."

"No, she couldn't have. Snell didn't have a bomb mark on him. The bomb had gone off before he was knifed in the store. So the only way she could have knifed him was to do it after the bomb hit her, but before she passed out in another room."

The men were all silent. Deputy Mingo came back with the rifle, and with nothing else.

Mingo reported, "They got clean away. One was hit some. I've got the men out looking for a wounded man, Sheriff. No one saw them. The rifle's a Winchester Model 64, lever-action, .30-.30. We must have a hundred of them around here. Serial number don't mean a thing on a deer rifle in this part of the country."

"Okay, Mingo. Keep them looking," McBean said.

The deputy went off. McBean turned back to Gentry and Shayne.

"What do you two want to do now? Talk to Rafe Jones?"

"That looks like the next step," Gentry said.

Shayne said, "After we talk to the wife. I want to hear what she has to say."

McBean nodded. "Okay, if she can talk yet. Let's go."

V

THE WOMAN LAY propped up in the hospital bed, her arms and legs a swath of bandages, and half her face bandaged. The doctor said she was out of danger, and could talk, but not for long.

"Mrs. Snell," Sheriff McBean said, "we want to ask you what happened the night of the bombing. In your own words."

The bandaged woman shifted in the bed, pain clear on her face, her single unbandaged eye glaring at them.

"What happened? They tried to kill us, that's what happened! They bombed us, and when that didn't kill Matt, that Jones came in and finished the job!"

"You and your husband were both in the store?"

"That's right."

"You were together when the bomb went off?" Shayne asked, watching her single unbandaged eye.

She shook her head, grimaced with pain. "No, I was in the store-

room. I mean, we were together. Then Matt went back to the alley to get something, I don't remember what. I was alone. I went into the storeroom after some candy I got there. The bomb went off. That's all I know."

"Did you see who threw the bomb, or planted it?" Gentry asked.

"No, I was in the storeroom."

"You didn't see anyone?" McBean asked. "Or hear anything? Maybe voices outside? Anything?"

"No."

Shayne said, "What about the threats on your husband's life? Those earlier attempts?"

"What about them? You want to know who sent them? He did, that dirty Rafe Jones! Him and his anarchist friends. They put a bomb in his car. Just luck that bomb didn't get him."

"Just how did he manage to escape that bomb in his car?" Shayne asked.

Mrs. Snell moved in pain, her eye closing as she lay back. "Him and Max Hanks was going to a meeting. They headed for the car. Matt had to come back for something and Max was waiting near the car when he spotted an oil leak. He looked under to find the leak, and spotted this bomb. They called the cops."

"And the sniping?" Shayne asked.

"Matt was in the yard, having a beer in a chair. He got up to get another beer and two shots went right through the chair he'd been in! He dived behind the porch."

"But you didn't see anyone either time?" Gentry asked.

"No," she said, her voice suddenly weary. "I didn't ever see anyone, but I know who was behind it, and now he's killed my Matt!"

Her voice rose to a low scream, and the doctor came running in with a nurse. The nurse went to calm her down. The doctor waved at Shayne, Gentry and McBean.

"That's enough! Out, all of you."

They left the doctor giving the injured woman a sedative. In the corridor, McBean eyed Gentry and Shayne.

"You figure anything from all that?"

"No," Gentry admitted.

Shayne rubbed at his jaw. "Two things bother me, Sheriff. First, no one was ever seen actually trying to kill Snell, not even that last bomber. The wife didn't see anything, according to her. Second, she was damned lucky to be in that storeroom just at that moment. If she hadn't been, the bomb would probably have killed her."

"So she was lucky," McBean said. "The bomb didn't get Snell, either. You could figure he was lucky, too."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "He was even more lucky. Not a scratch."

"Which all proves the truth, Shayne," McBean said coldly. "The bomb missed killing them both, but only Snell himself was stabbed. That wasn't a bomb thrown by rioters. It was a cold attempt to murder Snell, and when it missed Jones went in



and quickly stabbed Matt Snell to death."

Shayne and Gentry said nothing. What could they say? It had the feel of happening just that way, with too many witnesses to prove it.

"You saw no one else even around that store?"

"No one, and I got there about three minutes after the bomb went off," McBean said. "The city cops, and my deputy, Joe Mingo, showed up right behind me, too. No one else, Shayne."

"All right," Shayne said. "Can we talk to Rafe Jones now?"

"You can talk to him any time," McBean said grimly.

They left the hospital.

VI

THERE WAS NO interrogation room in the Morgan City jail considered secure enough, so Mike Shayne and Chief Gentry met Rafe Jones for the first time in his cell. Jones sat on the bunk and didn't glance at them as they came in. A tall, angular man met them instead.

"Percy Beecham, gentlemen. I'm Mr. Jones' lawyer. May I see your credentials? In this atmosphere of legal lynching we can't be too careful, can we?"

Beecham had a sharp, clipped voice, and his dark eyes were as hostile as the eyes of the police. Shayne swore inside—no one was going to make it easy to get to the truth in this case. Beecham examined the credentials, gave Shayne a sharp look, and turned to Gentry.

"So? Chief of Miami Police? I see the powers are gathering their most respectable forces. Or is Miami respectable, Chief?"

"I'm here as a consultant for the State Police. We want your client to have every break, counsellor."

"And the private eye we have here?" Beecham sneered.

"I'm here for a Miami newspaper. They want the truth too," Shayne said.

Rafe Jones jumped to his feet. "The truth? Somebody wants the truth about Rafe Jones? Don't make me laugh, shamus! Look at all of you! Talent for a frame-up! Goons to silence me! Pigs!"

The militant leader brushed his lawyer out of the way and stood glaring at Shayne and Gentry. He was well-dressed, young, with a vigorous and angry face. Not tall and not heavy, there was a sense of trembling power about him. His eyes were bright and passionate. His small hands clenched, showing scars, the scars of hard work. Intensity was all over him as he faced Shayne and Gentry.

"We're here to solve a killing, Jones," Shayne said bluntly, "and we don't give much of a damn what you think! You and McBean, we don't care what you have to say!"

Jones watched the redhead. His nostrils flared. "So? You're going to solve the murder, eh? How you going to do that, Mr. Shamus? The only witnesses were cops. They tell me I was the only man came out of that store. What can you prove against that? Like, man, that's all they got on me, you know. No one saw me do it, no prints on the knife. Just motive, and no one else. That's it, daddy."

"Maybe, and maybe not," Shayne said. "How about leaving the detective work to us? That's our bag, not yours. Now, they didn't see anyone. Did you?"

Jones stood rigid; his whole powerful, small body like some ramrod, as his burning eyes bored into Shayne. Then, abruptly, he sat down again.

The lawyer pushed forward. "Don't tell them anything, Rafe."

Nothing. This is a railroading and we stand mute. Let them hang us, but the world will know we deny their right when we stand mute in court!"

Jones sat. His shoulders moved in the dim cell. His young face turned slowly to look at the lawyer. Then he smiled.

"Hang us, Mr. Beecham? I don't hear anyone out to hang you, do I? No, lawyer man, it's me they're going to hang, and I don't aim to stand mute."

Jones turned to Shayne. "No, Mr. Shamus, I didn't see anyone else, either. But there was someone else, because I didn't cut that man. I went in to see if any of my people were inside, like I said, that's all."

"What did you see when you went in?" Shayne asked.

"Just what the cops did. Snell was on the floor near the back door. The place was a wreck. He was dead. I didn't even see the knife. I thought the bomb had got him. Later, I saw he wasn't marked up."

"Did you see Mrs. Snell?"

"No. When I found Snell, I looked him over to see if I could do anything for him, believe it or not. When I saw he was dead, I realized I had to get out of there. I mean, man, I knew the bind I was in right then. I ran out, and right into their hands. That damned deputy Mingo had me before I got two steps. Then the sheriff showed and that was that."

"Did you notice anything? Anyone? Even a shadow? A noise?"

"There was a lot of noise all

around, man. I mean, there was a riot going on. Nothing else. Just blown out windows and doors."

"The windows were blown out? The doors open?"

"No glass, man, and that back door wide open. Blown right off its lock."

Shayne stared at Jones, and pulled hard on his left ear. The slick lawyer, Beecham, was looking furious. His symbol wasn't acting right. Beecham didn't care what happened to Jones, as long as "the cause" had a martyr, but Rafe Jones wasn't going to be anyone's martyr if he could help it. Shayne was beginning to like the arrogant Jones—a little.

Gentry said, "What about the threats against Snell? The other attacks? What do you know about those?"

"I made threats, Chief. He made threats to me. It's a war we're in, and threats are part of it," Jones said flatly. "I never put any threats in writing, though, and neither did any of my people that I know. I never tried to kill him, and no one with me did."

"That you know," Gentry said.

Jones looked at Gentry. "Okay, that I know. Look, Chief, Matt Snell and me, we've known each other a long time. He was a punk kid and he was a punk man. Not the civil rights bit Beecham wants, no, just two guys didn't like each other. He was a crook in a lot of ways, and I showed him up more than once. You

want his killer, you look among his friends, not mine."

Gentry and Shayne looked at each other. The lawyer, Beecham, cleared his throat, glanced sharply at Jones.

"Whatever happened to Mr. Snell, gentlemen, is simply the result of the bigotry and repression of our people by illegal acts of men like him. He was a victim of the system. The truly guilty party is the Establishment, and we intend to plead innocent by reason of self-defense. You hear me, lawyer man? This is Rafe Jones talking now, not the militant leader. I didn't kill Snell. You can look in his life for a killer."

Beecham stood like a statue for a moment, his cold eyes completely empty as he looked at his client. Then he picked up his briefcase and walked out of the cell. Jones watched him go.

"He'd hang me for the cause, but Rafe Jones isn't hanging. No sir, you guys find the real killer. That's what'll save me."

Shayne nodded. He touched Gentry, and the two left the cell. A guard locked it behind them. Rafe Jones sat alone on his bunk.

Outside, Gentry said, "What do you think, Mike? He's got a way with words. I don't trust him far. He played it like we wanted it played."

"Maybe it was a show for us. I don't know. The innocent man, but if we don't find another killer, he'll go all the way with Beecham, and this town'll have a circus for a trial."

"Okay, what are you going to do?" Gentry said.

"What Jones said, Will. Look into Matt Snell's life."

Gentry nodded. "Right. I'll go to work on the actual death and bombing with Medenez. McBean is honest, I believe that, but he wants Jones to be guilty and won't work too hard, and who can say what his men feel? They worked on it so far."

"Use a vacuum cleaner on the place, Will. We need all we can get. Like Jones said, there isn't much to disprove."

"Yeah," Gentry said.

Shayne went for his car while the Chief went to find Medenez. All the way down Shayne was thinking about never having a case with less to work on than this one.

VII

HEADQUARTERS of the White Citizen's Council was on a side street off the main square of Morgan City. A crowd loitered in front. They did not look at Mike Shayne with friendly eyes. The big redhead pushed through and into the bare room.

"Yeah, buddy?" a hard-looking bantam said.

"Josh Drake. Where is he?" Shayne said.

"Who wants him?"

"I'll tell him that. Tell him McBean said I could talk to him."

The bantam didn't like it, but he measured his chances with Shayne

and decided he didn't have any. He vanished into some hidden recess. Moments later a big, slow man with a perpetual red face came scowling up to Shayne. "Who the hell are you, mister?"

"Josh Drake?" the redhead asked.

"That's right," Drake said, peering hard at Shayne. "You're one of those city cops got shot at!"

"That's right. I want to talk about your partner."

"Beat it!"

"Lay off the tough act, Drake. I've got McBean behind me, not that I need him."

Drake clenched his fists, took a step. Shayne's gray eyes narrowed into points of steel. He didn't even sway an inch backward. He just smiled at the big man. Drake started another step, looked around and saw no help close, and never finished the step. The big partner of the dead man licked his lips and his face fell apart.

"Okay, okay. What do you want with me?"

"You were Snell's partner? Fifty percent you and fifty percent Snell?"

"Fifty percent me, but not him. Sadie owned the other half."

"Sadie?"

"His wife, the missus. Matt got into some tax trouble a while back and put it all in her name. Not that he ever let her run anything, not Matt. He was a man, buster. A good man that damned Jones knifed!"

"Where were you when it all happened? It was store hours, a riot



LUCY HAMILTON

was starting. How come you weren't there?"

"I was on a delivery. Matt sent me himself."

"A delivery? A partner making deliveries?"

Drake squirmed in the dim interior. "Well, not exactly a delivery. Matt sent me to pick up some papers. Important papers. It was before the riot started."

"Who had the papers?"

"Abner."

"Abner who, Drake?"

"Matt's brother, Abner Snell. He done work for us sometimes."

"Abner couldn't bring it in himself, whatever it was?"

"Matt and Abner didn't meet much. There was some trouble once; and Matt wouldn't let Abner near the store."

Shayne studied the big man. There was a phony ring to the whole story. It might be true but there was something with a smell about it.

"What kind of papers did Abner have?"

"I don't know. They was personal."

"You said Abner worked for the store."

"Sure. But those papers wasn't about the store."

"And you went on a personal errand for Matt?"

Drake shrugged. "Matt was better at running the store. I done him favors like that so he could stay on the job."

Shayne rubbed at his gaunt jaw. "Matt picked a strange time. Did he insist you go?"

"He said it was real important. I got a bad temper, you know. Maybe he wanted me out if there was trouble."

That was the best theory Shayne had heard so far. Matt Snell had gotten Drake out of the store—why? Shayne was about to ask if Drake had any suspicions about why he might have been sent out of the store just at that time, when a small, blond woman suddenly broke into the dim room and began to scream at Drake.

"You dirty liar! I heard what you

been saying about Matt bleedin' Abner! You and Sadie're out to make Matt look bad, liar! You figure you need Abner now Matt's dead, don't you, and you got to go suck up—"

Drake's red face was pale as a fish's belly. "Shut up, Verna! This guy—"

The blonde, Verna, saw Shayne for the first time. She seemed to change before his eyes, all the rage draining away. Her pretty face went blank and innocent. Shayne decided that she was no girl, maybe thirty, but she was pretty, and she had a shape that would stand up to any beauty-contest winner.

"Hello," she said. "I didn't see you, Mr.—"

"Shayne. Mike Shayne."

"That private detective from Miami? Well, now, aren't you a big one."

"You were talking about Abner Snell, Miss—?"

"Sharp. Verna Sharp," she said, and laughed. "Oh, don't listen to me. I guess I've got a temper. I don't much like Abner, and this jellyfish here won't stand up to Ab, but it doesn't mean anything. I liked Matt, and I guess I don't want to see Abner take his place."

"What place, Miss Sharp? Drake tells me Mrs. Snell actually owns the business with him."

"He did tell you that, eh? Well, Sadie isn't about to run the store, you know? I guess that leaves Abner."

"Is that all you meant, Miss Sharp?"

"What else?"

Her voice had taken on an edge again, and her quick eyes were alert as she watched Shayne.

"I don't know," Shayne said, "but I sort of figure you've got more on your mind than who runs the store. Maybe you can tell me something more about Matt and Abner Snell?"

"Maybe I can't, mister. Now suppose you blow out of here, and leave us alone. You're not going to come around here making trouble. Josh is a jellyfish, but I'm not."

"You make me think maybe there's something to hide around here," Shayne said.

"Think all you want," Verna Sharp said. "Now you going to blow, or do I start screaming for help?"

"I never make a lady scream," Shayne said and he grinned his most wolfish grin.

He walked out. He felt the eyes of all the loungers out front on him as he waded to his car. There was tension in the air, an undercurrent of violence, and the hair on his neck bristled all the way to his car.

VIII

THE HOUSE OF Abner Snell was a run-down affair in a seedy section of Morgan City. It was a section that had once seen better days, but had gone downhill with its inhabitants. Desolation hung over Snell's house.

Mike Shayne rang the bell, looking at a ten-year-old car in the driveway. Slow feet shuffled to the door inside. It opened to reveal a stocky man with bleary eyes, a list to port, and a glass in his hand.

"Yeah?"

"Abner Snell?"

"That's me, in person? Who're you?"

"Mike Shayne. That drink looks good."

Abner swayed and beamed. "Join me, by all means, my friend Shayne. Come in, come in!"

Shayne followed the swaying man into a shabby living room that didn't look like it had been cleaned in a year. Abner rummaged among debris for a glass, found one triumphantly, and poured Shayne a glass of straight, colorless liquid. Shayne sipped it. It was good, powerful moonshine. Abner watched him.

"How about that, my friend Shayne? That's whisky. No color, no faking, just good booze. I've got a little old man does nothing but make it for me."

"Not for your brother?"

"Matt?" The stocky brother cocked an eye at Shayne. "So, that's it, eh? You're a cop?"

"A private cop looking for the truth."

Shayne had the sudden impression that Abner Snell wasn't as drunk as he seemed. Drunk, yes, but drunk in the way a man is who is a little drunk all the time, constantly, and whose mind remains clear.

"Truth? Here? About brother Matt? You are a dreamer, my friend Shayne."

"Josh Drake says he came to get some papers from you the night of the riot and killing."

"So he did."

"What kind of papers?"

Abner Snell swayed for a time. Then the brother drank and looked for the bottle. He poured a fresh drink, sat down. His eyes when they looked up at Shayne were as clear as any sober man's eyes.

"You don't think Rafe Jones killed my brother?"

"I don't know, Abner."

Abner nodded, "No, who does? He had reason, yes, but so did so many others, you see? Including me, of course. My brother Matt was not a nice man, no sir, not a nice man. A schemer, my brother Matt."

Abner Snell lapsed into a silence as if he were seeing his brother and his not so nice character. Outside a few cars passed. Children's voices drifted into the room. In this part of Morgan City the riot tension had not reached out to draw the people in all the way.

"You care to tell me about Matt?" Shayne said.

Abner nodded. "Why not? Matt can't worry me anymore, can he? You've been told, I imagine, that I worked for him at times? A favor. Those papers Josh Drake came for, very interesting papers. Green, you see? With pictures of presidents on them."

"Money? Why were you paying him money?"

"Not paying, my friend Shayne, simply delivering. Matt was a busy man. A small interest in moonshining, a bigger interest in a gambling operation just outside town. Undercover, of course, especially after he became a civic leader, so the money was given to me, and I passed it on. For this I was supported by my dear brother in fairly frugal style."

"Why did you take it?"

"Why?" Abner arched his brows, drank. "As I said, Matt was not a nice man, no. Some years ago I committed, shall we say, an indiscretion. It doesn't matter what it was. Matt knew, and so he had a hold on me. I can tell you that much, it's not unknown to many in the town."

"Blackmail? That sounds like a motive for murder."

"It truly does, if I only had had the guts. Rafe Jones, bless him, did me a favor. Or did he? Who will support me now, even in frugal style?"

"Verna Sharp seems to think Mrs. Snell will."

"Sadie? Good grief, not Sadie! She was tighter with a dollar all her life than Matt ever was, and he was a Scrooge."

"How close are you to your brother's wife, Abner?"

"Close?" the half drunk man stared up at Shayne. "You mean in that way? Not close, my friend Shayne. No. However, your point may be well taken. Matt seemed



disturbed lately about his mistake in having signed over the store to Sadie. It was worrying him almost as much as the attempts on his life. In fact, I had the idea sometimes that he suspected Sadie was trying to kill him."

Shayne sat up straight and studied the man. Abner's eyes had fogged up again by now. The brother sat nodding to himself. Was he telling the truth or trying a cover-up?

"What about Josh Drake? He was out of the store at a very opportune time. Did he have to come for that money when he did?"

"No, any time would have done, but Josh is a straw in the wind. No guts. Anyone can handle Josh."

"Did he have anything against your brother?"

Abner shrugged. "I don't know."

"The political action of Matt's, was that some kind of fake? A cover, maybe?"

"No, on that Matt was sincere. He honestly believed he had to help fight Rafe Jones and his militants. He was truly afraid they would destroy the city, and the threats scared him, but he had courage, I'll say that for him."

"Do you think Rafe Jones killed him?"

Abner looked into his glass that was empty again. "I don't know. He could have. He's as hard a man as Matt was."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"Me?" Abner blinked, shrugged. "I was around, about. Who knows where I am? Certainly not me. I float like a dream on a sea of alcohol, my friend Shayne."

"Do you? I wonder how drunk you really are, Abner?"

Abner Snell smiled. "You can continue to wonder. But think about what I had to gain. After all, Sadie gets it all, and Sadie doesn't love me."

"Maybe you had a reason to be afraid of Matt. That's a motive."

"Afraid? Why would I be afraid of Matt? He was my loving brother. Now go away, my friend Shayne. You bore me. I'm a drunk, you see, and everyone knows it. Nothing I say can be trusted. No one cares about Abner Snell or what he says."

Shayne watched the stocky man

heave himself up, get the bottle, pour a drink, and slump back into a chair as if Shayne no longer existed.

IX

WHEN SHAYNE returned to his car he saw something moving up the street of the shabby tract. Another car was parked there, and a woman leaned out the window on the driver's side, making motions at him.

She was motioning for Mike Shayne to follow her. The redhead nodded, got into his car and when she drove past he U-turned and followed. He watched the rearview mirror; but no other car appeared.

The woman ahead drove for some five winding blocks through the tract, then pulled off the road into a thick grove of palms. Shayne slowed and looked carefully all around but saw no one else anywhere.

Still, it could be some kind of trap, so the detective turned off the road cautiously, alert and with one hand resting on his automatic.

The woman got out of her car and stood waiting. It was the small, curvaceous blonde, Verna Sharp. Shayne got out, and went to her carrying his gun. Nothing happened. She eyed his pistol, looked him up and down.

"Scared, Shayne?" she said.

"Always," Shayne said. "That's how you stay alive in my business. What's on your mind, Miss Sharp?"

"Verna," the blonde said. "What did you talk to Abner about?"

"Not much. He's drunk. He didn't like Matt much, did he?"

She bit her lip, and a fury crossed her face. "I guess not, but Matt supported him! I suppose he told you that Matt pushed him around? Maybe Matt did, but Abner had it coming."

"Blackmail?" Shayne said.

"You can look at blackmail two ways, Shayne," she said sharply. "Abner says Matt was blackmailing him into being Matt's flunky, right? Only maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe Matt was carrying Abner when no one else would after what Abner had done. Abner couldn't get a job dog-catching with his record. So Matt gave him work, money. Maybe not a whole lot of money, or good work, but he did what he could."

"What is Abner's record?"

She laughed. "He was caught forging his employer's name to loan applications a couple of years ago in Miami. He lost the money on the horses. Matt paid it off and hushed it up for Abner, but if he ever tried to get a real job with anyone but Matt, he'd have it all come out."

"So Matt was doing him a favor by keeping quiet, and letting Abner work for him like a kind of slave?"

"You're damned right it was a favor! Matt could have let him starve. Abner always thought he was too good for Matt because he went to college and Matt didn't!"

Shayne let her righteous anger hang in the hot afternoon air. His

gray eyes studied her. She was a good-looking woman, and she had a lot of loyalty to the dead Matt Snell. She also had dark circles of grief around her pretty eyes.

"You were Matt's girl, weren't you, Verna?" he said.

She nodded. "Yes. You'd have found out soon anyway. He didn't want to fall for me, or me for him, but it happened. I don't much go for playing with married men, never did, and I'm no homewrecker. But Matt and I had it big for each other, and Sadie didn't care much anyway. I think she was playing around herself, too."

"With who?"

"Who knows? Abner, maybe. Sadie always thought Abner had more class than Matt, even if he did drink too much. Sadie's one of those women who figure on reforming their men."

"Anyone else? Drake?"

"Josh is a weak sister, but he likes Sadie. Besides, with Sadie he has the whole business. Josh would like that. The big shot, and hire someone else to run the store. Then, too, maybe there was another reason."

"A reason to want Sadie Snell?"

"And maybe kill Matt. I figure that Rafe Jones did it all right, but I'm not forgetting the rest. It was maybe real good for someone Matt got killed."

"What is the rest, Verna?"

She glanced around the grove of silent trees in the sun as if she, too, thought there might be a trap. But

there was no one, and nothing, in sight.

"I wanted to talk to you on the quiet because of the rest," Verna said uneasily. "Matt told me there was some stealing going on at the store. The books had been juggled some. He didn't know who, but I figured he thought it was Josh. He said he didn't know what he'd do when the time came for the annual audit."

She looked hard at Shayne. "That audit was due in a couple of weeks. Matt said he wouldn't cause trouble if it was Josh, just talk to him hard, but the store's in Sadie's name, and he didn't know what she'd do about it."

"Unless they were in it together, Sadie and Josh Drake."

"Yeah, unless that. Matt wouldn't have taken that."

Shayne took out a cigarette, lighted it. She held out her fingers and he gave her one. She smoked as Shayne looked away across the silent tract beyond the grove of trees.

"Where were you when Matt was killed, Verna?"

"Home. I wanted no part of that trouble and riot."

"You didn't happen to go near the store?"

"No."

"Can you prove it?"

"That I was home? Sure. Josh came around looking for Abner. He had to pick up something from Abner."

"Abner wasn't home?"

"I don't know."

"Could he have been with Sadie Snell? At the store?"

"Maybe, he hangs around there a lot when the store's closed."

Shayne rubbed his jaw. "Okay, Verna, and thanks. Anything more you want to tell me?"

"No. Only that I loved Matt Snell, and I want his killer to burn. I want the right killer, you know? I guess it was Rafe Jones, but if it wasn't, I don't want anyone using Jones to get away with it."

"Neither do I, Verna," Shayne said.

He got back into his car. She was still standing in the grove when he drove off. She was staring into space, seeing a dead man. Shayne was seeing something else as he drove away—a picture of a man with a lot of reasons to be murdered.

X

MIKE SHAYNE turned into the alley behind the bombed store where Matt Snell had died. He saw Gentry's official car parked up the alley behind the store.

And he saw something else!

A figure moved in the shadows behind the store. A man who wore a long, black slicker and moved stealthily. As Shayne came into the alley and stopped, the man was at the blown-out rear window of the store.

There was a pistol in his hand.

Shayne jumped from his car, shouted, "Stop! You!"

He would have liked to come up on the lurking man in silence, but there wasn't time—not if the man with the gun had someone inside the store as a target.

The man whirled at his shout. Shayne strained to get a look, but the collar of the slicker was up, and a soft felt hat pulled down low. All Shayne saw was a flash of pale face, the sun caught by two quick eyes, and then the man darted across the alley into the rear of another building and was gone.

Shayne raced after him.

He found the open door of the building where the man had vanished. He fired two shots in the air to alert Gentry inside the bombed store of Matt Snell, and to warn the lurking man that he was armed and in pursuit.

A door slammed ahead.

Shayne pounded through the building that was an empty shop, and reached the front door. He tore it open and plunged out into the next street. The fleeing man ran down at the left corner. As Shayne came out of the building, the man stopped and fired back at him. Shayne hit the concrete, and squeezed off two quick shots. The man vanished again around the corner, back toward the block where Snell's store was!

Swearing, Shayne jumped up and ran on. When he reached the corner, he stopped and looked around carefully this time. The street was empty. He came around cautiously. Something moved on the other side of the

street in a shadowed doorway. Shayne aimed his automatic, ran toward the movement.

Behind him a voice slashed harshly. "Okay, mister. Drop that gun!"

Shayne started to turn.

"Freeze! Don't move. Drop the gun and kick it away!"

Shayne dropped his gun and kicked it away.

"Okay, turn with your hands high. Real high."

Shayne raised his hands and turned carefully. He saw the gray uniformed figure of Sheriff McBeans's deputy, Joe Mingo. The deputy approached him warily. Behind Mingo, at the mouth of the alley behind Snell's store Shayne saw Josh Drake, the partner, breathing hard, and behind him Will Gentry and Lieutenant Maine just coming out of the alley.

Mingo stepped closer, then swore, "Damn it! What the hell were you up to, Shayne?"

The deputy holstered his pistol. His face was beet red now. He bent and picked up Shayne's automatic and handed it back to the redhead.

"Did you see a man run past before me, Mingo?" Shayne asked. "A man in a black slicker? With a gun?"

Mingo shook his head. "No, I didn't. I just drove up and heard the shooting. First one I saw with a gun was you. So I moved in. You were chasing a man?"

"A man I caught at the rear window of Snell's store. He had a

gun; he wasn't out for a stroll." Shayne said.

"Who was in the store?" Mingo asked.

Will Gentry came up with Maine and Josh Drake. "I was," the gruff Chief of Miami Police said. "Maine and I."

Shayne looked at Josh Drake. "Not you, Drake?"

"Nope, I just come along now, too. I didn't see no one, neither," the big red-faced partner of the murdered Matt Snell said. "I was in the alley, headin' for the back door, when I heard the shooting, too."

Shayne swore. "So no one saw anything except me?"

"That's the way it looks," Deputy Mingo said. "You sure there was a man?"

"There was a man," Shayne snapped, "and it's a hundred-to-one he was after Gentry. It looks like there's someone in Morgan City who really doesn't want us around."

"There's ten thousand in Morgan City who don't want you city guys around, Shayne, including me. So you be careful, you hear?"

"I'll be careful. Now how about answering some questions?"

Mingo nodded. "McBean says we got to work with you. Let's go back to the store."

They all walked back up the alley, with Shayne alert all the way. Inside the wrecked store, Mingo sat on the edge of a broken desk. Gentry sent Lieutenant Maine to watch the alley in case the man in the slicker got



second ideas about returning to the alley.

Shayne said, "How close a look did you and McBean take to this murder, Mingo?"

"Close enough to catch the killer, Shayne," the deputy said. "You going to tell me about finding out Matt Snell wasn't no saint? That maybe other people had reasons to want him dead?"

"That's about the size of it," Shayne said, and told Gentry what he had learned about Josh Drake, Abner Snell, Verna Sharp and Sadie.

"Hell," Mingo said, "there ain't nothing much new about all that, except I didn't ever know just what Matt had on Abner."

"You knew Snell was cheating on his wife with this Verna?"

"Sure. What's so special about that?"

"It gives Mrs. Snell a motive," Shayne said.

"How so? She didn't give a damn about Matt no more, and she had the store and the money in her name."

"She had the money too?" Shayne said.

"That's right."

"What about her playing around, Mingo?" Gentry said.

"I wouldn't know about that," Mingo drawled.

"Did you know about possible tampering with the store's books?" Shayne asked.

"No, and that ain't proven."

"And can't be, I guess," Shayne said. "I'll bet you a year's salary the books went up with the store."

Mingo shrugged. "I reckon they must have."

Shayne rubbed at his jaw. "You know, it was a pretty dumb thing for Rafe Jones to kill Snell like that. He was almost sure to get caught. You were all on the scene fast, and in a riot that was to be expected."

"So he's dumb," Mingo said. "Look, Shayne, like the sheriff says, if you come up with proof, we'll listen. All you got so far is a lot of rumors most of us know. If you get anything solid, I'll be around."

They both watched Mingo walk out, his stride swaying in arrogance.

Josh Drake laughed. "Your black boy ain't got a chance, not with Mingo on the case. Hell, him and Matt Snell was real pals. Didn't you

know that? This place was like a second home to Joe Mingo. Your boy is dead."

Drake laughed so hard his red face turned purple. Shayne and Gentry just watched him.

XI

MIKE SHAYNE said, "What did you find, Will?"

"Plenty," the gruff Chief said. "We've been over this place with a microscope, Mike, and there's something pretty interesting."

"What's that?"

"Well, in the first place, that back door wasn't blown open. It wasn't locked when the blast hit. From the way it was hit by the shock wave, and the flames, I'd say it was half open when the explosion came."

"Someone went out, or came in?"

"Maybe both, Mike. I can't swear to it, but from the way some of the debris is pushed around, I'd say someone came back in after the explosion."

"Snell?"

"Yeah, that's for sure. And maybe someone else."

"Any clues about who?"

"Not so far."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "What else, Will?"

"The explosion itself, Mike. That bomb wasn't tossed into the store. It was planted inside. We found evidence of a timing mechanism."

"Planted?"

"That's right. And rioters don't

usually plant bombs, they throw them," Gentry said.

Shayne turned on Josh Drake. "Mrs. Snell escaped by sheer chance, right? Or did she? In that store room she had a good chance to escape without a scratch. It was bad luck she was even injured."

"How do I know?" Josh Drake said.

"Was she usually here in the store at that time of the evening?"

Drake chewed his fingers. "No, I guess not. Only Matt asked her to stay."

"Why?"

"He figured he'd need help closing up if the riot started."

"Did she like it? Did she want to stay?"

Drake squirmed. "No. She wanted to go home. She said I should stay, but Matt said I had to go see Abner."

"Was there something wrong with the books?"

"How should I know? I don't know about books," Drake protested.

Gentry said, "What are you getting at, Mike?"

"Just this, Will. Rumor has it Mrs. Snell had a 'friend'; and we know Snell did. The store and the money was in her name; maybe she wanted Snell out of the way. Maybe she'd been stealing from the store. She could have planted the bomb, never dreaming she'd be here when it went off."

"Then, because she knew it was set, she ducked into the storeroom."

It went all wrong, she was hurt, and Snell wasn't because he'd stepped outside in the alley. He came back in, found her, maybe tried to help her. She was scared it'd all come out, so she stabbed him and managed to crawl back into the storeroom."

When Shayne finished there was a heavy silence in the shattered store. Police sirens wailed in the distance as the sun lowered outside toward evening—a tense evening in Morgan City. Josh Drake had come up from where he'd been lounging on a broken chair. He stared at Shayne.

"She wanted me to stay in the store! You mean maybe she wanted me dead too?"

"Who gets your half if you die?"

"I got a kid, only—"

"Only what?" Gentry snapped.

Drade wiped sweat from his red face. "Only we got that partnership insurance. I die, my partner gets paid."

"And Sadie is your legal partner, not Matt," Shayne said.

Gentry chewed on a cold cigar. "You think she tried to use the riot to cover a murder? What about those other attempts on Snell? The threats?"

"Maybe she arranged them all, or maybe she just saw a chance."

"It's going to take some proving, Mike."

"Maybe not so much, Will. I've got a hunch someone else knows about it. Someone who was supposed to be at home, but who wasn't."

Drake said, "Abner? I had a hell

of a time finding him. I never did find him until later."

"You didn't pick up the papers you went after?"

"Not 'till later."

"All right," Shayne said. "Will, you go and talk to McBean. There's something about that night, what he said about it, that's sticking in my mind. Go over it all, and see if you can spot anything odd."

"What are you going to do?"

"Have another drink with Abner Snell," Shayne said grimly.

XII

THE SHABBY TRACT house sat silent in the night. It was all dark by the time Mike Shayne returned to Abner Snell's home. The old car was still in the overgrown driveway, and a single light burned in the rear of the house.

Shayne parked up the block after driving past, and made his way back on foot. He moved silently, like a big cat. He circled the small house once, alert to be sure no one else was around. Then he rang the front door bell.

There was no sound inside the silent house.

Shayne rang again.

Still no one moved.

Swearing to himself, Shayne tried the door. It was locked. Abner was probably passed out from booze—and a guilty conscience? Where had the brother been that night? There was only one way to

find out if Abner Snell was really a harmless drunk

Shayne got out his ring of special keys and began to work on the door lock. It didn't take long. It was a standard lock, and it opened on his third try.

He stepped inside softly, and closed the door behind. It snapped shut with a loud click. Shayne listened. Still nothing moved in the house. The lighted room was to the rear, what looked like the kitchen.

He peered into each darkened room as he passed. He saw bottles, on the floor and on the tables, but nothing else. At the kitchen door he drew his automatic, and took a deep breath. Then he kicked it open and jumped in with the pistol held low to be aimed by his body whichever way he turned.

For a long minute he stood crouched like that just inside the kitchen door.

Abner Snell sat in a straight chair and grinned at him.

The brother didn't speak, and the grin didn't change. It would never change. Abner Snell sat dead, a kitchen knife in his chest, his arms hanging loose as if they didn't belong to the rest of his body.

Shayne didn't move for some moments. His gray eyes were studying every aspect of the kitchen. He saw the bottle on the table, almost full. He saw the second glass, empty. Abner's glass was shoved away, just beyond his reach if he had been able to reach anything anymore. He saw

the chain hanging loose on the kitchen door, and the door itself ajar an inch or two, as if someone had gone out the back way in a hurry.

There was nothing else he could see from where he stood. And what he saw all told the story: Abner had sat down to drink with his killer, had opened a fresh bottle, so had probably not been drinking before the killer came. The killer had not waited long, because there was still half a glass of moonshine in Abner's glass.

No, the killer had sat down, drained his own glass in a few quick gulps, perhaps for courage, and had struck without warning. Someone Abner had known.

Shayne moved into the kitchen, careful of what he touched and where he stepped. The body was still warm, without rigor. Under the dead feet, where they rested flat on the floor like a student in a classroom, the dust and dirt that had not been cleaned in weeks, if not months, was scraped and marked.

Shayne stared down at the marks. Abner had not died at once, he had moved his feet, sat back with the death grin on his face, before he died. Yet the blow must have knocked him all the way back in the chair. Then why had he leaned forward?

Shayne studied the table where the glasses stood. He saw it. In the dust on the table a finger had traced what looked like a design. . . a letter . . . a single letter? The letter "S". Or

was it a twisted "J" done by a dying hand?

It looked most like an "S". Abner trying to name his killer? Sadie Snell? Verna Sharp? Someone Shayne didn't even know? Or maybe it was a "J" and for Josh Drake? Or was it a letter at all?

The redhead sat down in the silent kitchen and lit a cigarette. He studied the room again. He looked at the glass used by the killer. He didn't touch it, but he knew that it didn't matter—the glass had obviously been wiped clean. The handle of the knife was rough wood. Abner Snell hadn't been close enough to his killer, or quick enough, to grab any threads, or hair, or skin.

Why had Abner been killed? There could only be one reason—the brother had known too much. What? Something he had seen on the night of the killing? Something he had guessed, added up from various things he knew?

Shayne finished his cigarette and went to search the house. He worked slowly, carefully. He found nothing. Whatever Abner Snell had known he had taken to the grave with him.

The redhead called Medenez at the State Police Office. He reported the murder, and then he left. It was irregular to leave the scene of a murder, but this was an irregular case, and somewhere there was a killer who was running scared and violent.

In his car as he drove away, sirens already wailing far in the distance,

the detective wished he could tell himself that that the murder of Abner Snell ruled out Rafe Jones as a killer. But it didn't. Jones had a lot of friends who were not in jail.

Jones had friends who would kill for him, if that was needed.

XIII

AT THE HOSPITAL they did not want to let him see Mrs. Snell. Mike Shayne insisted. The guard on her door called Sheriff McBean. He said it was okay.

"Well, if you don't stay long," the doctor agreed in the end. "She's had a hard time."

"Is she still in bad shape?"

"Fairly. She was never in danger, you understand; most of her injuries came from debris falling on her. But she's had a profound shock."

"Can she walk, Doc?"

"Certainly not! She won't leave here for a week at least. Her burns must heal."

"I mean *can* she walk, if she had to? If the hospital caught fire?"

"Well, yes, she can walk in a real emergency."

"Thanks, Doc," Shayne said.

He thought about the emergency of the need to kill a brother-in-law. As he walked to her room he saw that the fire stairs were close, and there was only the one guard on the door. Guards can be tricked into leaving doors.

Inside the room he stood for a moment watching the woman in the

bed. The bandages were off her face, and he saw that she was younger and prettier than he had expected. Where the bandages had been there was only a small scar now, and burned skin, but not really bad burns. She would heal.

She saw him there. "What do you want?"

"Some answers, Mrs. Snell."

She peered at him, half raised on the bed. "You're on of those cops from Miami?"

"Mike Shayne, yeah."

She lay back. "Go away, Shayne."

The redhead advanced to the bed. She didn't look at him; her eyes staring up at the ceiling. He pulled a chair up and sat down, lit a cigarette. Still she lay without turning her head.

"You ever look at a ceiling all day and wonder what it's all about?"

"No," Shayne said. "I don't think Rafe Jones killed Matt."

"Don't you?"

"I don't think Rafe Jones, or the rioters, tried to bomb you or Matt."

She looked at him. "Is that so? What did they try to do with the bomb, kiss us?"

"They didn't throw a bomb, Sadie," Shayne said.

"So who did, Genius?"

"No one. It was a planted bomb. It was meant to kill someone, Matt I suppose. It was meant to look like the work of rioters. But it failed, and so a knife was used."

She watched for a time. Then she



looked up at the blank ceiling again. "You've been smoking weird stuff, haven't you?"

"I know about Matt and Verna."

"Bully for you. That makes you and half of Florida." She looked at him again. "If you're cooking up a motive for me doing the job on Matt, you better have a better one. I didn't give one damn about Verna and Matt, except to pity her."

"Why?" Shayne said. "Because you had your own lover?"

Her head jerked, and something

like fear flitted across her stolid face. She recovered fast, watched the ceiling again. "No, I don't need any man. Matt was enough for a while."

"I can find out."

"No you can't."

Shayne smoked and watched her where she lay. She was a controlled woman, except for that momentary reaction. If she had anything on her mind she wasn't showing it now.

"Then someone else killed him, and probably meant to kill you."

"Sure, mister. Rafe Jones and his gang of anarchists."

"Tell me more about what happened that night. You didn't usually stay at that hour."

"Didn't I?"

"No, you didn't. Why did you stay that night?"

"Matt asked me to. I didn't want to."

"Why did he ask you?"

"He wanted me around in case of trouble."

"He stepped out into the alley just before the blast. Why?"

She looked at him, her eyes flat. "I don't know he did. I was in the storeroom. I guess he was just lucky."

She laughed a short, harsh laugh when she said that, and grimaced in small pain. The laugh seemed to amuse her even more. She smiled up at the ceiling.

"You're sure you were in the storeroom when he went out? You didn't know he went out?"

"No," she said, and then she

stopped. "Hold on. Yes, he did start for the back door. I'd forgotten. I was still in the store, and he said something about having to check on the outside locks on the windows—we padlock the alley windows. I don't really remember too well. I didn't see him go out. I went into the storeroom, then—boom! and..."

"And what?"

"I heard someone in the store, talking. After the blast."

"Who was it? Do you know?"

"Sure," she said, "I know. Rafe Jones!"

The redhead stared at her and she began to laugh. It was a wild, half-hysterical laugh. Shayne stood up and left the room. In the hall he could still hear her laughing.

He went down to his car and lit a cigarette and sat there with his hands shaking. Everything he had found out added up to zero. He was sure, now, that Rafe Jones was innocent—but Sadie Snell was right. He could never prove it against the simple facts that Jones had motive and was there.

If only he could figure who had planted that bomb, and why!

The woman had motive, and yet... somehow, it didn't quite ring right. It was Matt who had asked her to stay, and had sent Josh Drake away. Matt who knew about the possible shortages on the books. Yet, Matt had stepped out just at the right time. It was almost certain she would have been killed except for a fluke.

The redhead sat up straight. Three times Matt Snell had been attacked,

and three times he had escaped without a scratch! The bomb hadn't touched Matt. After the bomb had exploded, then Matt had been killed.

Shayne started his motor and drove off fast.

XIV

THE HOUSE OF Matt and Sadie Snell was different from Abner Snell's house. It was bigger, in a better section, and the grounds were well manicured.

It was still a tract, but an elegant tract with a formal entrance of stone pillars and an iron gate. It would be a rich and restricted development, patrolled by private police, or by city police acting in the interests of the residents, and not friendly to strangers.

Shayne cut his lights and glided to a stop a half mile past the house in a dark clump of trees where his car wouldn't be spotted. He walked back to the dark house. Nothing moved anywhere around the house.

He circled it, looking for an easy entrance. He found it in an open window at the rear. When he was sure no one was watching him, he climbed up in, and stood in a darkened bedroom with the narrow single bed glowing in the moonlight. A man's bedroom.

He switched on his flashlight and searched. It was Matt Snell's bedroom. But there was nothing in it that Shayne could make mean anything. He stood in thought for a

time. Then he went out into a central hall and found the door he was looking for—the one that led into the cellar.

Down in the cellar he saw the usual equipment, and the door into another room. The door was padlocked. Shayne broke the lock and walked into a work room. There was no windows in the cellar. He switched on the light.

It was a complete home workshop, with full equipment. It looked like the late Matt Snell had been an amateur machinist and electrician. Shayne surveyed the neat shop.

He found nothing until he looked into a waste basket bin. He took out a sheaf of brass turnings, some strands of wire, and the remains of the insides of at least one clock.

His gray eyes glistening with excitement, he went on searching until he found a drawer at the bottom of a workbench and took out two small devices. He did not have to guess what they were, he knew—remote radio control devices that would operate machinery on radio signal. They had two receiving devices operating solenoid switches.

He put all he had found into his pocket, and kept on with his search. He had part of what he wanted but he sensed that there should be more. He didn't find it, but in a filing cabinet beside an old desk he found something else.

Shayne held his discovery and thought about Matt Snell, a man of meticulous bookkeeping habits. What

he held was a rent receipt for a room at some address in Morgan City. Why would Matt Snell rent a room—and less than three months ago?

He switched off the light and went up and out into the dark night. He checked to be sure he was not being followed, and hurried back along the private tract road to his hidden car. He jumped into the car, and checked his map of the city. When he had located the address, he put the map away and drove off.

The streets of Morgan City had that strange, ominous silence of a city under siege. People were gathered at most street corners in small groups, and bands of police, troopers and sheriff's men roamed out in the roadways. On the square, in front of the jail, a silent throng of Rafe Jones's people had gathered to stare at the cordon of police guarding the jail.

Shayne passed through the square, and turned into the shabby downtown street where he found the address on Matt Snell's rent receipt. It was a three-story frame rooming house that had seen better days a long time ago. It was an area where even the riot tension made little difference to the residents; they were far too busy with their private troubles.

Shayne walked up the front steps and found the manager's bell. He rang, and heard movement behind the door of the rear first-floor apartment. He was waiting when the door opened. A brisk old lady in high-

necked black eyed him with a cold shrewdness.

"If you want a room, you're out of luck, young man."

"I want to see a room, not rent one," Shayne said, and showed her his credentials.

His name rang no bells with her. "What's the beef?"

"Skip-trace," Mike Shayne said, improvising on the moment, and pretty sure the old lady had had a lot of skip-trace men at her door in her day. "A man, probably using a phony name," and he went on to describe Matt Snell.

"He a runout?"

"That's it. Is he into you?"

"A week, I ain't seen him in a couple of days. Room six, third floor. How much he skip on?"

"Two grand in car payments."

"Any cash we find I get first for my rent, buster."

"I'm only after a repo on the car," Shayne said.

"Okay, fair enough, only his car ain't around. Maybe you'll find a lead upstairs. Let's go."

She went briskly up the stairs ahead of Shayne. Dead-beats were not new to her. She fumbled with keys at the door of room six and got it open. Shayne followed her inside.

He saw a neat, bare room with no visible signs of anyone having really lived in it. There were no knick-knacks, none of the normal debris of transient living, no clothes lying around as would have been normal for a man living alone.

"It was always like this," the woman said, "so I just figured he was out a couple days. His suitcase is still in the closet."

Shayne examined the drawers and the closet. They were empty except for the suitcase.

"What did he have in the suitcase?" Shayne pointed out. "I don't see any reason for a suitcase."

"I guess he traveled in the clothes he's wearing. Maybe planned to buy more," the manageress said.

"Did he have a woman visitor, regular?"

"Nope, no visitors at all I saw. It sure does look more like where a guy rents just to bring a girl so his wife don't find out, don't it?"

Shayne had expected the room to be where Matt had met Verna, but it wasn't from the look of it—no evidence of any woman having ever been in the room. When he thought about it, there was little reason for the room. Sadie Snell knew about Verna, and Verna had a place of her own for meetings.

The manageress was searching through all the drawers and finally sighed wearily. "Nothing, not a penny. Just some junk and writing paper."

"What kind of junk?" Shayne snapped.

"See for yourself."

She pointed to a bottom drawer in a bureau. Shayne looked. He saw lengths of brass pipe with the ends turned and threaded on a machine. There were coils of wire, parts from



clocks, and one slender, deadly blasting cap of the electrical type. There was electrical tape, and an empty plastic package that had once contained plastic explosive.

Matt Snell had made a bomb in this room—more than one bomb, most likely.

The writing paper told the rest of the story. It was the same type as the threat notes. There were two laboriously pasted-up notes still in the drawer. Shayne knew what they would be before he read them. The manageress didn't, and she read them with her mouth dropping open.

"Hell, these are threats against that Matt Snell who got killed! This guy was out to get Snell!"

"Yeah," Shayne said, "he was the man threatening Matt Snell, and he

made his bombs here. You sit tight and don't touch anything. The sheriff'll want to see this."

"Mister, I'm going out and staying out."

Shayne went with her, but he didn't hear any of her chatter of outrage. He was thinking of Matt Snell, who had sent all those threats to himself, who had rigged all the attacks on himself. And who had set up a bomb in his own store.

XV

CHIEF GENTRY and Sheriff McBean sat in the sheriff's office and looked at what Mike Shayne had found in Snell's workshop, listened to what he had found in the rented room.

"He was some kind of engineer in the Army," McBean admitted. Shayne nodded. "If his friend hadn't spotted the bomb under his car that day, he'd have found it himself on some pretext. With the notes, everyone would believe it had been planted to try to kill him."

"What about the sniper firing at him?" McBean said.

"Trickier, but not so hard," Shayne said, and picked up the miniature radio transmitters and receivers. "He set a rifle up near his house, aimed at that chair he was drinking beer in. The trigger was fixed to operate on a solenoid switch. He got up at the right moment, and fired the gun himself with a remote radio signal. No sweat

at all to set it up to look like a murder attempt."

Gentry said, "And the bomb in the shop?"

"Planted, as you found out, Will, and set to go off by a time. He knew the exact time, and he trusted his skill. So just as it was about to go off, he stepped out into the alley. He was safe. I wondered about that real lucky moment."

"He was trying to kill his wife?"

Gentry said. "The whole thing was set up to make it look like someone was trying to kill him, and all along he was building up a cover for killing his wife!"

"She had his store and his money in her name. He had Verna, and wanted out. He figured Sadie'd never let him go, and if she did, she'd never let him have his money and store back. She had him over a barrel. Maybe she would have let him go to Verna, but stripped bare, and Matt Snell wasn't about to leave her with his money and business."

"What about that tampering with the books?"

"He probably was stealing from the store himself. That was another motive, I figure. Sadie probably either knew or would find out. Anyway, a bomb finished the books, and Matt would get his business back so the shortage would never be found."

Gentry chewed on his cold black cigar stump. "It fits, all right Matt had her stay when she usually didn't. He sent Josh Drake out, he didn't

want Drake killed. Then, at the exact moment, he stepped outside into the alley. As far as he knew when he left, Sadie was still in the store."

"Only she went into the storeroom just before it went off, and that saved her," McBean said. "Then who came in and killed Matt? Did Sadie herself manage to come out of the storeroom and knife him when he came back in to make it look like he had just escaped another attempt on himself?"

"Maybe," Shayne said. "There's one big point that sticks in my craw. Sadie got into that storeroom at the exact right time. It's almost too much luck, too much coincidence."

"You think she knew Matt was setting off the bomb?" Gentry asked.

McBean objected, "How could she have known when the bomb was set for? How did she know that it was that time? She couldn't have guessed that right, too much luck."

"All she had to know was that Matt was going to try to kill her, Sheriff," Shayne said. "Then she watched him, and when he stepped outside, that had to be the moment. If she knew what he was going to do, he would have tipped it when he went out the back way. Then she ran for the storeroom."

"Damn it, she could have been killed in that storeroom," McBean said.

"No, I don't think so. I think some of her injuries were actually self-inflicted—she let herself be banged up. The Doc said her injuries

weren't so bad, they looked worse than they were."

"But she couldn't have killed Abner!" Gentry pointed out.

"She could have. It's possible," Shayne said, "if she managed to slip out of the hospital. The Doc said she could walk in a pinch. But I don't think she did. I think she had a partner all along."

"Partner?" McBean said, his eyes hard. "Who?"

"Her lover, Sheriff. Everyone seems to think she had one, a man in the background. I think she has a man, too. I think that was the last straw to Matt—he was afraid she would try to leave him and take the money and business with her."

"You think Sadie has a lover?" McBean said slowly.

"Don't you? Everyone else does. Think, Sheriff. Do you have any clue who it could be?" Shayne asked.

McBean frowned. In silence of the office both Shayne and Gentry watched him. The big sallow-face man seemed to be trying to go over all of Sadie Snell's past actions in his mind. Finally he shook his head.

"No, I don't know anyone."

Gentry said quietly, "Could it be Rafe Jones?"

This time the silence was heavy. Shayne didn't want to think about that, but Rafe Jones had said he had known Matt Snell all his life. Maybe he had known Sadie Snell that long, too. McBean acted like a man who had been struck by a hammer.

"Jones is a local; he knew Matt

well. He had to know Sadie, too. I'll be honest with you, I've leaned over in this because much as I don't like Jones, I didn't figure he was really dumb enough to kill Matt like that for political reasons. But if he had personal reasons, too—maybe. Yeah, maybe."

Gentry said, "What do you want to do, Mike? You've done the work so far."

"Abner Snell tried to tell us something about his killer. An 'S' or a 'J' means something about the killer. A 'J' could be Jones, too. Rafe himself couldn't have killed Abner, but he's got associates who would do anything for him. Abner was dying; his mind probably wasn't clear or too rational. He traced the first thing that came into his mind in the dust of the table. Maybe he didn't know the actual killer, but knew he came from Rafe Jones and traced the 'J' in the dust."

"Okay," McBean said, "What do we do about it?"

Shayne scowled, rubbed at his jaw. "Something's been deep in my so-called mind for a while. Something you said, Sheriff, or reported. I asked Will here to talk to you about it, go over what you said. Did you?"

McBean nodded. "Sure did, but we can't see any clue in anything I said."

Shayne continued to scowl. "Damn it, I can't think of it, either. Okay. Then I think maybe we had better have a long talk with Sadie Snell."

XVI

SADIE SNELL was sitting up this time, her pretty face already almost healed. She watched them all file in with an amused expression.

"Well, what have we here? Every cop in sight."

"How are you, Sadie?" McBean asked quietly.

"Fine, Sheriff. Never better," she said, and there was an edge of double meaning in her voice. She was not mourning for Matt very hard.

McBean nodded to his deputy, Joe Mingo, to take up a position at the door. Sadie Snell arched an eyebrow as she watched Mingo amble to the door with his arrogant hip-sway.

"Oh, oh!" Sadie said in mock dismay, "I guess this is going to be a big, powerful session, right? All you big wheels. Why? Ain't you got that Rafe Jones hung yet?"

"Not yet, Sadie," McBean said. "In fact, it looks like maybe he won't hang after all."

"No?" she said, her voice neutral. "How's that, Sheriff?"

"Because he didn't kill anyone, or bomb anyone, Mrs. Snell," Shayne said.

"Oh? Who did?"

Her voice had an innocent air—too innocent. She watched them all, and reached for a cigarette. Her eyes were on the door where Joe Mingo lounged, easy but alert.

"Matt planted the bomb himself, Sadie," McBean said. "We figure you know that."

"Matt? Are you crazy? Why would he plant a bomb in the store?"

Shayne said, "To kill you, Mrs. Snell. Matt was out to kill you. It was all a scheme to get rid of you—the threats, the attacks, all of it."

"Me?" she said, smoked. "You got to be crazy now."

"Are we?" Shayne said. "If you hadn't stepped into that storeroom you'd be dead now, and he was outside in safety just when it went off. Real lucky."

Her eyes were unblinking on Shayne. She smoked. Her left hand began to shake, and she lay back with her head on the pillow and her eyes closed. She lay that way for more than a minute, just breathing. When she finally spoke, her voice was very low.

"No, I won't believe it. Matt wanted out, yes, but not that way: Never that way."

"Come off it!" Shayne snapped. "Not only did he try to kill you, but you knew he was going to try. He wanted his store back his money. He wanted to cover his juggling with the books, and he wanted Verna Sharp. You knew that, and somehow you knew he was going to kill you."

She snarled, "Go away, will you? Tell me Matt was out to kill me, maybe I'll believe you. But don't tell me I knew, because I didn't."

"You knew, Sadie," Shayne said. "You and your man, your new man, set out to trap Matt. I don't know if you set out to kill him or



just trap him, but you were ready for something or you wouldn't have been in that storeroom. That wasn't just luck. You knew, and you went in there to be safe."

She laughed. "You call this safe? This hospital? I almost did get killed, mister."

"No you didn't. I figure you planned to murder Matt, or you would have run right out there instead of letting yourself be injured, instead of doing some of the injuries on yourself. You figured if you looked like you'd been caught in the bombing, it'd be the best alibi."

"Why didn't I just turn him in, smart man?"

"Because it looked like the perfect set-up. You never thought we'd find out Matt planted that bomb himself."

"Nuts. Why would I kill him even then? I already had it all, and if he gets sent away I'm rid of him."

Sheriff McBean said, "You forgotten the insurance, Sadie? There's partnership insurance on Matt, and there's his life insurance. I hear he carried a big policy."

"Insurance and just plain revenge and a new man you wanted to marry," Shayne said. "With that plus a perfect set-up all fixed by Matt himself, it's enough."

"And what do you expect me to do, confess?" Sadie sneered. "Mister, if I did all those things, and you're telling me, that means you've got no proof at all."

"No, none at all," Shayne said, "and I never said you killed him with your own hand, Mrs. Snell. But you know who did, and you know why. What you don't know is that Abner knew, too."

"Abner?" she said, licked her lips. "What could he know?"

"I think he'd figured out what Matt was up to. Or maybe he'd seen something. I think he wanted to catch Matt, to have something on Matt. So when he should have been at home that night, he was in that alley behind the store. He saw Matt come out, saw the explosion. He ran to see if you'd been killed, to catch Matt, and instead he saw Matt killed."

Sadie Snell said nothing. She licked at her lips, and her eyes looked around at all of them. Busy eyes, her brain working hard behind them. She stared at the door, where Joe Mingo leaned with his arms folded and his face impassive. She looked at McBean, and then back at Shayne. A light dawned in her eyes.

"You're lying, Mister. If Abner saw, you wouldn't be here. You'd have made an arrest. Abner didn't see

anything, unless it was that Rafe Jones knifing poor Matt. Because Rafe Jones killed Matt, and nothing you can do is going to make people believe anything else. Not now in this town."

"Abner saw, Sadie," Shayne said, "but he didn't tell. I think maybe he tried to use what he saw. I think he tried to make some money. It didn't work. All he made was the graveyard. He's dead, Sadie, murdered."

Sadie Snell made a sound. Just a sound, like some small animal. She seemed to shrink on the bed, all the defiance gone out of her. Her voice was a whisper.

"You're lying!"

"No, Sadie," Shayne said. "Are you afraid? I'd be afraid. You think murder is simple, ends easily? No, it goes on. One leads to another. Only the first one is hard. Who's next, Sadie? You, maybe? You know too much, don't you?"

"Go away! You're crazy! I don't know nothing."

"You think because he loves you, wants you and your money, he won't hurt you?" Shayne said. "Don't believe it, Sadie. There's a funny thing about murder. After a man kills, what he killed for suddenly isn't as important as staying safe, staying alive. I've seen it a hundred times—a man throwing away what he killed for in the first place because he's scared now for his neck. Tell us, Sadie!"

"No I don't know anything! You're all crazy! Rafe Jones killed

Matt! You hear me, Rafe Jones killed Matt!"

Her shout echoed through the hospital. Nurses appeared in the doorway. A doctor came. Shayne, Gentry, McBean and Mingo stood there for another few minutes. Then they turned and left while the doctors calmed the hysterical woman.

"You stay around, Mingo," McBean said, "in case she changes her mind."

Mingo nodded, and remained where he was like a silent, wooden indian. The others left.

In the street McBean said, "Now what? If she knows, she won't tell. She's too scared."

"Or too involved," Gentry said.

"Both," Shayne said. "We've got to find out who her man is. Let's go to the store. We know more now, maybe we can spot something we missed before."

Gentry nodded, and McBean went for his car to lead them back to the bombed out shop in the ghetto.

XVII

IN THE DARK night, the moon down now, the gutted store was like a ghost with jagged edges and a wind blowing through its silent emptiness.

"He must have been in the alley," Gentry said. "He saw Matt come out, the explosion came, Matt went back inside, and he followed."

"Maybe he didn't plan to kill Matt. He used a knife that was

already in the store," McBean said.

Mike Shayne said, "I think you're right. I think he just planned to catch Matt. But when he got inside, he saw Rafe Jones outside in front, maybe coming in, and he saw the chance to get rid of Matt all the way, take over Sadie and the store."

"Let's have a look at the back alley," Gentry said.

They went through the ruined shop and out into the alley. McBean shined his light. The three men spread out, McBean searching the ground, Shayne searching the walls around the door and Gentry studying the door again.

"It was open, and Matt was outside. He couldn't have seen the killer," Gentry said.

"Then the guy had to be up this way in one of his doorways," McBean said. "It figures that Matt would have been pretty alert when he was planning a bombing like that."

"Not a damn sign on these walls anywhere," Shayne said, and joined McBean looking into the doorways on both sides of the alley.

They searched four doorways closely without any results. Gentry joined them at the fifth doorway. There was nothing on the ground around or inside the doorway, and they were going on to the sixth doorway when Gentry suddenly stopped, turned back, and turned his light on the right wall inside the doorway.

"Look over here," the gruff Chief

said suddenly. "What do you make of this?"

They all pointed their lights at the wall. A series of marks at about the level of a man's upper thigh were scratched in the wall. It was a white stone wall, and the marks stood out as pale, whiter cuts in the soft stone. There were ten or twenty of them, close together parallel to the ground, all about the same depth, and tending to overlap but never quite in the identical place.

"Something metal rubbed against the wall here," McBean said.

"Either from someone passing with the same thing in his hands, say, every few days," Shayne said, "or from someone standing here quite a while and rubbing over and over against the wall as he looks out and down the alley."

"What kind of store is inside this door?" Gentry said.

McBean stepped back, and counted doorways from the gutted store of Matt Snell and Josh Drake. "Shoe store. What the devil would they carry in or out that would scratch up a wall like that?"

"I don't think it was anyone carrying anything. I think our killer stood here watching the back of Snell's store. He was wearing some thing metal that scratched the wall every time he looked out," Shayne said.

The big redhead stepped up to the wall and measured it against his belt buckle. The marks were much too low.

"You're too tall, Mike," Gentry said.

The stocky Chief measured himself against the wall. His belt buckle was closer but still just too high.

"A very short man," McBean said.

"I don't think it was belt buckle," Shayne said, tugging hard on his left earlobe. "That would mean he had been facing the blank wall. No, something at his right side, a key ring, maybe."

"But none of our people with 'S' or 'J' are that short, except maybe Rafe Jones," Gentry said.

"Or a woman," Shayne said.

"Verna Sharp? Why? What did she have to gain by killing Matt?" McBean said. "Unless—maybe she was in on the plot, and got scared after the explosion? Maybe she was afraid Matt would be caught and would talk, especially if she realized that Sadie was still alive"

"Hell," Gentry growled, "then they'd have killed Sadie, not Matt. No, it could only be fear, and it's happened before. Matt was the only one who could have known if she was part of the plot to kill Sadie."

Shayne was silent. The big redhead was staring at the marks on the stone wall inside the door. He stood with his right side facing the wall. His gray eyes were down to points as he scowled at the wall.

He muttered, "Abner wrote an 'S' or a 'J'. Damn it, what was he trying to tell us? He was almost dead, his brain must have been a mess, not thinking clear or sharp, but he tried

to let us know who had stabbed him."

"Maybe it wasn't a name at all, something else," Gentry said.

Shayne nodded, and stared down at the marks on the wall, and suddenly his eyes widened and he swore softly to himself there in the dark alley.

"What is it, Mike?" Gentry said sharply.

"Wait!" Shayne snapped.

They stood quietly.

The redhead closed his eyes and stood as if in a trance. His lips moved, but no sound came out. He stood that way for a full two minutes before he opened his eyes and looked at Gentry and McBean.

"I think I know," he said quietly, but it's not going to be so easy to prove. It's all right in front of us in what happened here after that bomb went off, but I can't really prove it. McBean said it, and Rafe Jones, and even Josh Drake, but I need more."

"Tell us, Shayne, whatever you think you have," McBean said.

"No," Shayne said. "I've got to do this my way. McBean, I want you to go back to your office, and pass it around that I think there's evidence that points to the killer in Matt Snell's workshop files. Say I know there is, I missed it before. Gentry and I are going there now. Call it in, then get your men and go and see all our suspects and let them know. Will you do that?"

"Is it going to flush the killer? Is that what you want to do?"



"That's what I want to do."

"Okay, I'll go along this time, but you better know what you're doing. You want me to go in, or call in?"

"Call it in, and let Mingo know at the hospital so he can let Sadie Snell know. Then have Mingo leave her alone in her room. If she makes a call, don't listen. It could tip our man."

"Okay, I'll do it your way."

McBean went off to his car to call

in. Gentry stood in the alley with Shayne.

"Tell me, Mike."

"Not yet. I could be wrong. Let's go."

The two of them left the alley and went to Shayne's car. Lt. Maine followed them in Gentry's car. They drove in silence through the night toward the dark house of Matt Snell.

XVIII

NOTHING MOVED around the silent house as Mike Shayne and Will Gentry made their way around the window Shayne had used earlier. They climbed in the window and listened. There was no sound in the empty house.

"Down into the cellar," Shayne whispered.

They went down the narrow stairs into the dark basement, and Shayne pointed to the workshop with its broken lock. Gentry looked around at the cellar.

"There's not much cover down here, Mike. You think he'll be armed?"

"I know he'll be armed, Will. And he'll be wary. But he might not expect two of us. I figure you can cover from over there behind the washing machine?"

"Where will you be?"

"Right in the workshop. I don't want to take a chance on missing him, Will. If I'm right he'll move quick, and he'll know how to handle himself."

"If he suspects a trap, why will he come?"

"He has to," Shayne said grimly. "He has to be sure there isn't any evidence, and he has to get rid of us. I think he's tried to get rid of us twice already."

"The man in the black slicker?"

"Yeah. Now let's get set. I don't know when he'll show up. It could be any time."

Gentry went to the washing machine and seemed to vanish in the shadows. Shayne went into the workshop and looked around. There was a large barrel on the opposite side of the workshop from the filing cabinet where Shayne had found the receipt for the room. Shayne slid behind the barrel, his automatic out, and settled down to wait.

An hour passed.

Ten more minutes.

Then Shayne held his breath. He had heard a faint noise above on the first floor of the house.

He listened.

The noise came again—a soft footstep, very soft and quick.

Shayne strained to hear, but he heard nothing until he was aware of a presence in the cellar. He had not heard the cellar door open, or anyone come down the stairs. No light had shined. But someone was in the cellar, and, then, inside the workshop. Gentry had not heard or seen him.

Shayne waited, crouched down where he could not see, and conscious of the looming shape out

in the workshop. He listened. The filing cabinet suddenly scraped as it was opened, and a faint light seemed to glow from nowhere. The man was using a pencil flashlight.

Shayne raised up and flashed his flashlight full on where he knew the filing cabinet stood.

"What the—"

A man whirled, and Shayne saw him clearly in the bright beam of his flashlight. A man in the gray uniform of the sheriff's office, with his heavy pistol in his hand and his empty holster flapping against his right thigh—the pistol that had made the scratches on the stone wall of the doorway behind Matt Snell's store.

"Freeze, Mingo!" Shayne snapped.

Deputy Sheriff Joe Mingo didn't freeze. His pistol was up and firing. Shayne fired. Mingo leaped away through the open workshop door.

"Halt!" Gentry cried from behind the washing machine. Shayne's light probed out through the workshop door and caught the whiplike, craggy-faced younger man like a moth on a pin. Mingo stood there for a brief second, looking back at Shayne, and then toward the shadows where Gentry was hidden.

"You're through, Mingo," Shayne called. "Drop the gun."

Something seemed to cross the face of the handsome, young deputy. A cloud, or a vision. For another second he stood there, and then he raised his pistol and aimed straight at where Shayne stood.

Shayne shot in the same instant that Mingo shot.

But Will Gentry had shot before either of them.

Joe Mingo was hurled across the cellar to crash on the floor. His shot went wild into the ceiling. Shayne's shot passed through the empty space where Mingo had been.

Mingo moved once as Shayne and Gentry approached warily, and then lay still.

XIX

ALISTAIR McBEAN'S sallow face was pale as death as he sat in his office and looked at Mike Shayne and Will Gentry.

"Dead? I can't believe it?"

"I guess he didn't want to face a murder trial," Shayne said. "He knew Sadie would talk now try to save her own skin."

"She's talking like a mockingbird," Sheriff McBean said, and his eyes had something close to tears in them. "Joe was the best deputy I've had in ten years. With me for five years. What made him a killer?"

"Who knows, Sheriff?" Shayne said. "The woman, the money they'd have, hate for Matt Snell, and maybe hate for Rafe Jones. They knew about Matt's scheme to kill Sadie. Mingo staked the place out, and when he saw his chance, maybe saw Rafe Jones coming up outside through the bombed out front, he just killed Matt."

McBean brushed at his eyes. "The

damned woman admits it all now. Says she didn't know about Joe going to kill Matt. She and Joe were going to be big, she said. Poor damned fool!"

"It happened, McBean," Gentry said quietly. "You teach them, but they see too much quick money. They don't have it inside, sometimes. Being a op, carrying a gun, gives some men a sense of too much power, of too much arrogance and violence."

McBean looked at Shayne. "The gun, that's what scratched that wall, right? The gun at his side. That's what tipped you?"

Shayne nodded. "That and what you all said about the first minutes after the bombing. Mingo was the first one there. You all said it. I wondered how he happened to be right there to grab Rafe Jones as he ran out. He'd been there all along, and Abner Snell saw him in the alley."

"What was Abner trying to tell us, Mike?" Gentry said.

Shayne sighed, "It was 'S', all right. For 'Sheriff.' His mind was fogged. He knew Mingo mostly as a deputy sheriff. He couldn't think of deputy right then, just sheriff. So he tried to tell us his killer had been a sheriff—Mingo."

"Josh Drake said he hung around a lot—around Sadie, not Matt, right?"

"I guess so," Shayne said. He looked at McBean. "How's Rafe Jones taking it?"

"How do you think? He's yelling to be let out right away, and he's shouting what he's going to do to this town."

Shayne smiled. "He's a hot-tempered man, McBean, but I think he's a clear-headed man and honest. Let him blow off some steam, and then sit down and talk without men like Matt Snell around. I think he'll talk fair now. He's had a taste of violence without reason, and he knows by now that you're an honest sheriff."

McBean nodded. "I've had a taste of jumping to conclusions, too. I think we'll be able to work it all out now."

Shayne and Gentry left soon after. The square was clear now, and they saw that the White Citizen's Headquarters was closed and padlocked. The last thing they saw was the tall, militant lawyer, Percy Beecham, hurrying angrily across the square towards his car. It looked like Beecham was going home. Both Mike Shayne and Chief Gentry grinned as they passed the glowering lawyer who had no more cause to make hay with.

A simple murder without a cause. Soon Morgan City would be back to its normal peace.

It was high time.

the masterpiece

by HAROLD ROLSETH

Up there the dead man waited. Waited for his lovely bride, who had kissed—and killed . . .



WHEN BYRON, my older brother, called me from Italy one evening in June, I was delighted. I was further delighted, and astonished too, when he told me that

he had just acquired a wife. He was close to forty, ten years my senior, and I had long since decided that he would never marry. From his voice I could tell he was radiantly happy.

"She's wonderful, John," he said, and I didn't doubt it for a moment. Any woman who could captivate Byron Kendall would have to have something special.

Byron was a millionaire several times over, and every cent of his fortune he had earned honestly through his uncanny business sense and his boundless energy. He would buy a rundown, bankrupt industrial plant for its scrap and real estate value, and in short space of time convert it to a thriving, bustling concern.

A faltering shoe factory here, a dead chemical plant there, each would acquire new vigor under his talented guidance. And each, when sold, would add substantially to his fortune.

I must say that wealth was only an incidental matter with Byron. To him it was simply the yardstick which measured the success of an operation. His satisfaction lay in the creative aspect of his work, of making something of value from something cast off and worthless.

I had Byron's same creative urge, but in a far different direction—and, I must add, with far less in the way of financial returns. But like Byron I had no great concern for wealth. I was equally as happy in my work as he was in his.

What creative talents I possessed went into my efforts as an artist. Critics, generally speaking, have been kind in their judgements of my work, and a few of the bolder have predicted that in years to come I may achieve a certain degree of fame. I do not strain myself to justify these predictions. Like Byron I find my joy in the doing of my work.

Although Byron would be overjoyed in setting me up on a lavish scale, I pay my own way mainly through the sale of commissioned portraits. Only once have I accepted Byron's bounty. Three years ago he gave me as a birthday gift the house I now live in.

I say house only in the sense of meaning a dwelling place. Actually it is a huge mansion, the grandiose dream home of a lumber baron who built it three quarters of a century ago on the shores of Lake Mishawack two miles out of Clemens Junction.

The lumberman was either a wry prankster or insane. He had attempted the architectural impossibility of combining colonial simplicity with Victorian frippery and Gothic majesty. The result was a structure so ugly that it achieved artistic purity. I shouted with delight when I first saw it, and Byron bought it for me.

The double doors, actually portals, were of solid three-inch oak large enough to accommodate a moving van. A massive bronze knocker, when used, created reverberations which caused windows to rattle and

dust to rise from the solid plank flooring.

On stepping through the doors for the first time, I got the feeling of standing in an unfinished skyscraper with no floors laid above the first. I suppose the loftiness of the huge room was intended to convey a cathedral-like impression, but, in keeping with everything else about the house, it failed. The immensity of the room made the oversized furnishings seem like things for a doll house.

Across the room from the doors an open stairway rose heavenward, turning midway to reach a balcony which extended around three sides of the room. On the landing of the stairs the climber was unexpectedly confronted by his shadowy image in a giant mirror set in a tarnished gilt frame. The effect was somewhat startling, since there was no logical reason for a mirror to be placed there.

I occupied a cluster of downstairs rooms with another huge front room as my studio. I did, however, keep several upstairs rooms aired and tidied for guests.

Several days after Byron's phone call I received a letter from him. It was largely a eulogy of Rowena, his bride, and I felt a warm glow over the great happiness he had found. They would be returning to America in a month or so and would be able to spend a whole week with me. I was overjoyed, not only to see Byron again, but to meet the woman who

had managed to captivate him so completely.

I hadn't as yet thought of a wedding present for them, and now it occurred to me that full length oils of the two might be the very thing. I had numerous photos of Byron, and I could have his portrait completed by the time he and Rowena arrived. Then I could paint Rowena while they visited me.

Another thing I liked about the idea was that it could be the means of getting them to prolong their visit for a week or two. After all, they couldn't expect me to turn out a good painting in a single week.

I got busy at once. There was nothing pressing me, and I was filled with enthusiasm over this project. It had definite purpose, and I was determined to make it as fine as my talent permitted. Possibly Rowena might not like the idea of posing, but I wasn't too concerned. Byron would be enchanted with the idea of her portrait and could easily handle anything like that.

I spent some time in studying my photos of Byron. He made an excellent subject. His features were strong and balanced but not so regular as to make him look ordinary. His expressive gray eyes were outstanding. They could be warm or bleak depending upon circumstances. Whenever I visualized Byron in my mind, it was his eyes which came to me strongest.

For a week I made sketches, some of them crude, but each one designed

to set solidly in my mind a part of each of the concept of what I wanted Byron's portrait to be.

Finally I set to work on the huge expanse of bare canvas. Usually I start a piece of work hesitantly, but this was different. So clearly was the visual image of what I wanted that the process of putting it on canvas seemed almost a mechanical matter. The work progressed with astonishing rapidity. Three days after I had picked up my brush I knew I would achieve the effect I strove for.

Then came the stunning cablegram informing me of Byron's death. Conrad Hurley, the teenage son of Mrs Hurley who came in each day to do my housework and part of my cooking, handed it to me as I sat resting on one of the concrete seats scattered over the lawn.

I read and re-read the flimsy slip of paper until it blurred, not grasping, not believing the cold impersonal words: *Byron dead by drowning. Body not recovered. Letter follows immediately. Rowena.*

I think I mercifully lost consciousness for a time, for I next found myself standing at the door of my studio declining Mrs. Hurley's well-meant urgings that I eat something.

I spent the night in ceaseless pacing of the vast front room, fighting desperately a desire to scream. "It can't be... it can't be." The words kept hammering in my head in an instinctive but vain effort to reject something so horrible.

By morning I had gained control of myself, and I gratefully drank the hot, strong coffee and ate the breakfast which Mrs. Hurley prepared.

I spent three endless days waiting for Rowena's letter. There was no way I could reach her. They had been hopping gaily from one place to another without plan or time schedule. Finally the letter arrived.

I read Rowena's letter through four times without pause. She wrote in a feminine, lacey hand, and the paper held a faint fragrance. They had spent several delightful days, she wrote, near Rapallo at a small but exclusive resort on a magnificent stretch of Mediterranean shoreline. There Byron had conceived the idea of chartering a small yacht for a weekend on the water.

Rowena had felt a strange premonition of danger, but Byron had been so eager she had said nothing. On the first night out, with a full moon making the sea of silver and with the yacht scarcely moving, Byron had taken a sudden notion to plunge in for a swim. She had tried hard to dissuade him, for again the felling of impending danger had come over her, but Byron had laughingly ignored her entreaties.

He had swum out perhaps fifty yards from the yacht, and Rowena was tearfully begging him to return when suddenly he had given a gurgling cry and had vanished. Her screams had brought the four man-crew to her side in an instant, and they at once set about lowering a

small boat to rescue him from the water.

Rowena had not waited for the boat but had plunged into the water swimming frantically to the spot where Byron had gone but to no avail.

A radio call to shore had brought the authorities and with professional equipment they had conducted a search that had lasted throughout the following day. Byron's body could not be located.

The letter ended by saying that as soon as official matters had been concluded and she had set her own affairs in order she would come to see me. Even though we had never met, she felt our mutual sorrow had brought us close together.

I went to my studio and looked long and hard at my unfinished portrait of Byron. I removed the canvas from the easel. The picture was wrong, all wrong. It was created for everyone to look upon. I must paint another picture of Byron, one that would be exclusively Rowena's—one of a Byron that would be hers alone.

I set to work immediately, but this time Byron's portrait did not come easily. I was not painting my Byron; I was painting Rowena's Byron. I had the feeling of working with an alien medium on a subject that was also alien. But I persisted with a determination that kept me at the easel every moment of the day and night—many nights without any sleep at all.

On the day that Rowena's telegram came saying she would arrive in Milwaukee the next day, I hung a sheet over the finished portrait of Byron.

I met Rowena at the Milwaukee airport the following morning. I could see why Byron had been captivated. She was indeed beautiful. She recognized me, no doubt from a photo of me which Byron may have had, and she came toward me with an effortless grace.

She stopped before me and studied me appraisingly with eyes of startling beauty. They were large and dark and heavily fringed with a trace of an upward tilt at the corners. Her skin was surprisingly white and made her full, perfectly shaped lips stand out vividly. Her eyes were almost at a level with mine.

"John Kendall," she said. "I would know you anywhere."

"Byron's praise of your beauty were all understatements," I returned. "But he was close enough so I would have known you too, Rowena."

On our way back to Lake Mishawack I waited for Rowena to open up on the matter of Byron, but she said nothing. Our talk was of small inconsequential things.

Rowena viewed my home with the same detached air of appraisal she had given me. We went in and again Rowena made her appraisal. She said nothing, but there was a faint look of amusement on her face.

I rang for Mrs. Hurley, whom I

had instructed to come over and prepare a light lunch for us. Then I said to Rowena, "Why don't you go upstairs and freshen up. Your room is at the top of the stairs. I'll have your bags sent up in a moment."

Rowena nodded and started for the stairs. She was just beginning the long climb when Mrs. Hurley came out from the kitchen.

I watched Rowena. She climbed the stairs with the same beautiful grace with which she walked. My breath quickened as she approached the landing.

She reached the landing, and her body went rigid, and from her throat came a cry of such unbelievable terror that a chill swept through me in spite of what I knew.

She stepped back onto nothingness, her arms flailing desperately. Then she came hurtling down the long, long stairs gaining a terrible momentum, her body no longer graceful. She struck the floor with sickening force and lay silent and motionless.

"Merciful God," moaned Mrs. Hurley.

I looked down upon the broken body of Rowena. Her head was twisted at an odd angle, and I knew with certainty that she was dead.

"Call Dr. Barlow," I said to Mrs. Hurley. "Then run home and get Con. I'll need his help."

As soon as Mrs. Hurley had left the room I hurried up the stairs to the landing. Averting my head, I

removed from in front of the ornate mirror my second portrait of Byron—Rowena's Byron. I rolled it up and took it to my studio.

Several hours later, when the house was empty, after Rowena's body had been removed and the sheriff had secured statements from both Mrs. Hurley and me, I returned to my studio.

I unrolled the portrait of Byron and hung it on the easel. It was Byron without question but a Byron I had never known. His gray eyes, bleak and accusing, seemed to stare out at something beyond me. Dank, wet hair hung across his brow, and beads of water stood out on his bleached skin. A strand of seaweed lay across his chest.

I took the portrait down and rolled it up again. I kindled a fire in the fireplace and when it was burning briskly, I laid the roll gently in the flames. The roll twisted in the heat as though in pain and opened up for a moment Byron gazed at me again. The heat grew stronger and Byron's lips curved in a sad, gentle smile. Then he was gone forever.

For a long time I stood before the fire staring into the flames. Why, I wondered, had Byron's eyes looked so sorrowful.

Was it because his wife had murdered him? Was it because I had avenged his murder? Or was it, perhaps, because of his abnormal fear of water which had prevented him from ever learning how to swim?

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JULY 1969

TUTORED TO DEATH

*A rich old cuckold was dead, there
were no clues, and dead men tell no tales.
No tales? Well, how about that little . . .*

by **FLETCHER FLORA**



AT EASE BEHIND his desk in his headquarters cubbyhole, Lieutenant Joseph Marcus rocked back in his chair in the lees of the day and looked at Fuller with a benign eye.

"There is something rotten," said Sergeant Bobo Fuller, "in Denmark."

"How so?" said Marcus.

"I'm not sure." Fuller sat down in Marcus's other chair, clamped his knees in hammish hands, and knitted his brow in the throes of his uncertainty. "It looked plain enough. On the surface, that is. And the explanation seems logical enough. Off the top of the head, I mean. But

I keep smelling something funny."

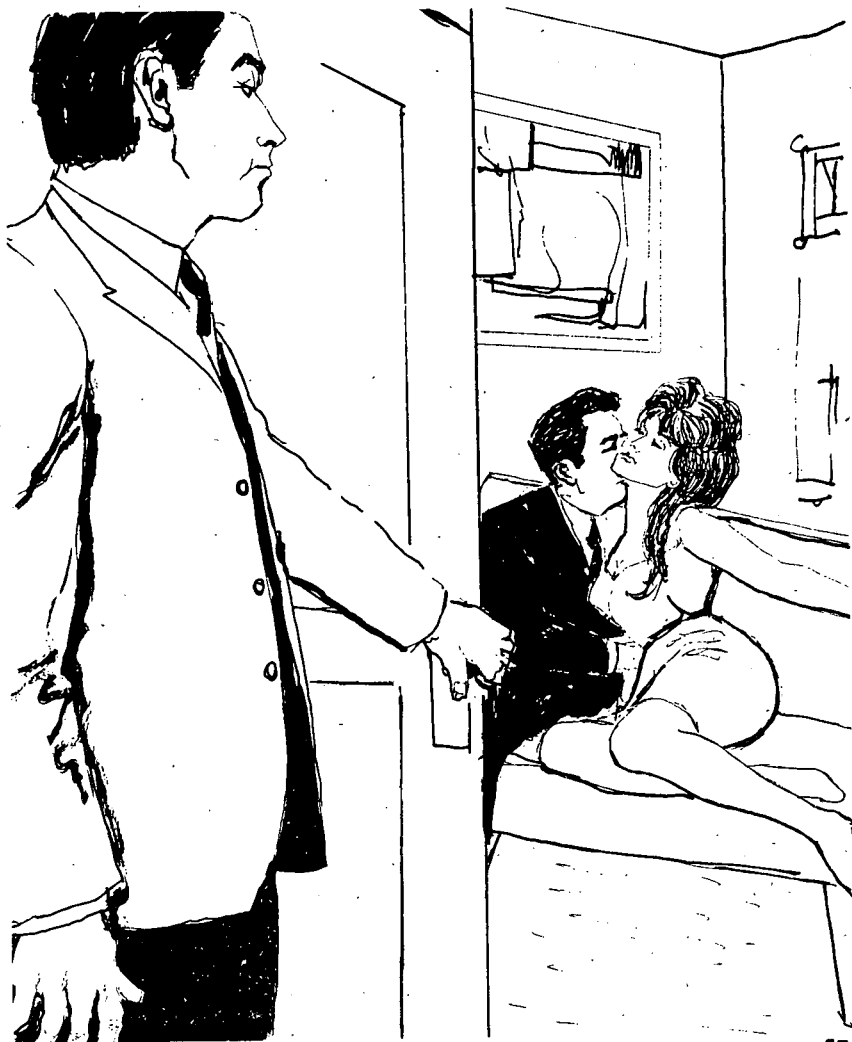
"Sniff away, Fuller. Never discount lightly the proddings of the nose. Kindly favor me with one of your admirable accounts, adhering strictly to the pertinent, and maybe we can smell together."

"Well, this old cuckoo was up on top of a ladder, painting the frame of a window of his wife's bedroom. Why the hell should a guy with millions of dollars want to paint the window frames of his-own house?"

"Because, Fuller, the old cuckoo was Dieter Flaxman. Back in the days when John D. Rockefeller was

Featuring

LT. JOSEPH MARCUS



distributing dimes to urchins, Dieter was damning him as a wastrel."

"Oh, come off. I know he had the reputation of a skinflint, but there has to be a limit."

"You'd be surprised. The habits of thrift are hard to shake. Thrift, Fuller, is part of the national heritage. It was elevated to statecraft by Calvin Coolidge. However, I'll concede that old Dieter had another reason for grubbing in the ground and teetering atop ladders. Handiwork around the house was his hobby. Other retired millionaires collect stamps or paintings or first editions, or write their memoirs with the help of a ghost. Dieter puttered. He fixed things. He mowed the grass and raised tomatoes and operated the roto-rooter. In this instance, as you say, he was painting the window frames."

Fuller endured this brief lecture with commendable tolerance. In the stolid expression of his beefy face, rather like that of a perplexed bull, there was only the faintest flicker of his chronic annoyance, seldom latent and never for long. Marcus was a lousy show-off. Understood. If he got your goat, which he frequently did, it was a tactical error to let him know it.

"If you want to know what I think," he said, "I think he had another hobby besides odd jobs."

"Quite possible. What, precisely, do you have in mind?"

"Making love, that's what."

"Really? Well, it staggers the

imagination, but it's not inconceivable. The last I heard, Satchell Paige was still pitching baseball."

"The old devil should have been ashamed of himself."

"Fuller, you're a harsh man. Surely you wouldn't begrudge an old gentleman a little diversion in his dotage. But let it go. What's more to the point is what gave you this notion. Did he have his bedroom papered with gatefolds from *Playboy*?"

"What he had in his bedroom, the gatefold should get. You ever met Mrs. Dieter Flaxman?"

"I haven't had the pleasure."

"If you do, wear dark glasses. Otherwise, she might knock your eye out."

"Am I to take it that Mrs. Flaxman is young and attractive?"

"You are to take it that Mrs. Flaxman is a ravishing wonder."

"I've rarely heard you so eloquent, Fuller. You pique my curiosity, and you may, if you keep on, arouse my tired old glands. Spare me further details."

"Whatever you say. Just the same, you can't help having a few thoughts when an old man with a young wife has a fatal accident. Especially when the old man's got more money than the Denver mint."

"True. I myself tend to think dirty on such occasions. However, it doesn't do to let errant suspicions run away with good sense. The fact is, beautiful young women do sometimes marry rich old men. Although

love is an unlikely motive, most of them are content to wait patiently until the old man dies and his will is probated. Meanwhile, in the interim, things happen. Among the things that happen are accidents.

"Old men are prone to accidents and injury. Their reflexes are slow, their eyesight is poor, their bones are brittle. They slip on floors and trip on stairs and generally fall down where younger men stand up. Once in a while, I'd guess, although I've kept no statistics on the matter, one of them even falls off a ladder. Which is, by the way, where we left Dieter. On top of a ladder. Take it from there, Fuller."

"Right. As I said, he was painting the frame of a window of his wife's bedroom. The room's on the second floor, and the ladder wasn't very long. Propped against the window sill at a sharp angle, it was just long enough to extend about a foot above the sill. What I mean is, it wasn't very stable, and the old man was in a pretty precarious position right at the top.

"Mrs. Flaxman was in her room when he first climbed up and started to paint the frame, but he had the window open, and the smell of the paint made her sick, so she went away to another room across the hall, on the back of the house.

"When she came back later—about three o'clock in the afternoon, it was—old Dieter was gone, and she couldn't see the end of the ladder projecting above the sill. She thought

he'd finished, but the window was still open. She went over to close the window, and down below on the wide flagstone terrace she saw Dieter. He was lying on his back with the ladder partly on top of him. She has no idea how long he'd been there, except it had to be under an hour. From the looks of it, the ladder had fallen over and pitched him onto the back of his head on the flagstones. Cracked his skull."

"Didn't she hear any sound? A yell or a crash or anything?"

"She says not. She was across the hall with two doors closed between him and her. Besides, she was listening to some music on FM. That's what she says."

"I assume that no one saw the accident. Otherwise, there would have been an alarm."

"You assume right."

"Who was on the premises at the time? Between two and three, that is."

Fuller dove into a pocket for a refresher, a small notebook, and came out flipping pages.

"Let's see. Here we are. Besides Dieter and his wife, the following; Hudson Estermay, nephew; Clay Flaxman, grandson; Veronica Dickens, secretary; Maude Doughty, cook and housekeeper; George Elwood, butler. There are a couple more who weren't in the house or on the grounds at the time of the accident. Ellen Dorsey, a maid, had been given time off to keep a dental appointment. Dallas Greeve, a

yardman, had been sent downtown by old Dieter himself to buy another gallon of paint. That's the lot. Counting Mrs. Flaxman, eight all told. Six present, two accounted for."

"Have you checked out the two who were away?"

"I have. Ellen kept her appointment, and Dallas bought his paint. The clerk in the paint store didn't know Dallas Greeve from Adam's off ox, but he verified the sale of a gallon of the kind of paint old Dieter was using, and his description of the purchaser was close enough to be convincing."

"Where were the other six? Damn it, you'd think at least one of the six people would have seen or heard something. Old Dieter must have squalled like a tomcat when he felt himself going over backwards. On second thought, though, maybe not. Maybe he froze. That's common enough with frightened people in sudden danger."

"Well, I've already told-you that Mrs. Flaxman was across the hall in another room, two closed doors between. Hudson Estermay was taking a nap on a couch in the library. Clay Flaxman was reading a book in a gazebo at the foot of the garden behind the house. Veronica Dickens was typing some letters in a room that the old man used for an office. Maude Doughty was in the kitchen, and George Elwood, between two and three, was here and there around the house on one chore or another."

"All widely dispersed and engaged in innocent diversions."

"So they said. That's not to say that one of them isn't a damn liar."

"True. One or more."

"No one's story is verified by any other one, as they can't prove they're telling the truth. The hell of it is, I can't prove they're not."

"An unfortunate impasse. Tough luck. Meanwhile, your nose is a quiver."

"It is. Something stinks."

"Fuller, I commend you. Your eye is sharp, your nose alert, your instincts sound. And you're right. Something stinks. Like a rotten mackerel in the moonlight, it shines and stinks. I borrow the expression, Fuller, from John Randolph of Roanoke, a master of invective. He applied it, with an appropriate change of pronoun, to Henry Clay, who challenged him to a duel for the privilege."

"So you smell something too. Would you mind telling me why and what?"

"Your account has given me a point or two to ponder. We shall see, Fuller, in good time. Tomorrow, I think, will be soon enough." Marcus stood up and reached for his hat. "Your eloquence has made me timid, Fuller. I wouldn't dream of exposing myself to your ravishing wonder without a night's rest and a belly full of breakfast."

SERGEANT FULLER'S eloquence, Marcus decided, had been less than

adequate. He, Marcus, had interpreted Fuller's somewhat astonishing reaction to Mrs. Dieter Flaxman as being closely akin in character to the whistle of a drugstore cowboy. He had envisioned young Mrs. Flaxman, therefore, as being an obvious sex-pot, a mammalian blitzkrieg of curves.

She was, in fact, nothing of the sort. Her attack upon the senses, although positive and immediate, was subtle and insinuous, the deadly seduction, almost narcotic in effect, that is the rare weapon of those women in whom the whole is infinitely greater than the sum of its parts.

Her hair was ripening corn silk. The color of her eyes was that of the cattails he used to gather for his mother's vases in the autumn. Her body was a reed beside a pond where the wind was blowing lightly. Her voice, asking him what he wanted, was the soft and sorrowful musing of a pigeon in the eaves on a rainy afternoon.

Whoa! thought Marcus.

Having been put with Fuller into the library by Elwood, he rose from the chair that Elwood had assigned.

"I'm sorry to intrude at a time like this, Mrs. Flaxman," he said. "Please forgive me."

"Not at all." She watched him gravely and nodded her head once, as if she were, having inspected him, indicating approval. "I suppose it is more to do with poor Dieter's death."



"Yes. I'll try not to disturb you any longer than necessary."

"That's kind of you. What can I do to help?"

"You needn't concern yourself overly. I would like to examine the terrace where Mr. Flaxman fell. And then, perhaps, you will answer a few questions and let me ask a few others of your family and servants."

"Is this necessary? I'm sure that we've already told Sergeant Fuller everything we know. As I recall, he made quite a thorough examination of the terrace yesterday afternoon."

She favored Fuller with a glance that somehow pinned a medal on him for devotion beyond the call of duty, and Fuller, who had risen with Marcus to stand and clutch his hat in massive paws, somehow managed in

return, without moving or speaking, to give the impression of a dancing bear what had just been tossed an acorn.

Marcus was glad for Fuller to have his kudos. Indeed, Fuller had risen appreciably in Marcus's own regard. In the matter of Beverly Flaxman, he had revealed himself as a man with vital juices and rare discrimination, however weak his use of adjectives.

"I'm sure of that," Marcus said. "Sergeant Fuller is competent and thorough. But it is advisable to give exceptional attention to circumstances that demand it. Dieter Flaxman was a prominent man. It's to your advantage, as well as ours, to make certain that there was nothing extraordinary about his death."

"Are you suggesting that there may have been?"

"I'm not suggesting anything, Mrs. Flaxman. I'm merely anxious to have this investigation satisfactorily and definitely closed."

A shadow passed across Beverly Flaxman's face. In her cattail eyes there was an expression of sad submission to the inevitable.

"You are not being candid with me, Lieutenant. That's too bad. I am neither a child nor a fool, I assure you, and I'm as aware of circumstances as you are. I'm a young woman? Dieter was an old man. I was poor before my marriage; Dieter was immensely rich. Dieter dies suddenly by apparent accident. Old man dead; young widow alive. It's easy enough for a suspicious mind to draw

an obvious inference of some foul play."

"I apologize for my suspicious mind. At any rate, you will be anxious to prove the suspicions false."

"Naturally. You wish to examine the terrace, Lieutenant. Come along. I may be able to help you."

She turned and walked out of the room, Marcus trailing her and Fuller trailing Marcus. They went down a hall and outside, on to a terrace of huge flagstones.

The terrace was very wide, extending perhaps thirty feet from the foundation of the house, enclosed along its perimeter by a stone balustrade. The house itself was constructed of stone. The wood trim, including the window frames, was painted white. The frame of the second floor window under which the trio had stopped had been partially given a fresh coat. The storm window, which had been removed for the job, was still leaning against the foundation below. So was the ladder which had fallen to spill Dieter Flaxman onto the terrace.

It was not a tall ladder. A rapid estimate by eye confirmed for Marcus the report that it could reach the window only if it were leaned against the window sill at an angle perilously close to ninety degrees. Beside the ladder, set aside and left, were a couple of rags, two brushes now stiff as sticks with hardened paint, a wooden paddle for stirring, a gallon bucket of white paint that was

slightly less than half full, and a smaller bucket of plastic paint an inch or two deep at the bottom, into which the paint had obviously been poured from the larger bucket for easier handling by the painter on the ladder.

"Give me a hand, Fuller," Marcus said.

Together, they leaned the ladder against the house, the sidepieces resting above on the window sill. The base of the ladder was not more than thirty inches from the foundation of the house. Marcus clucked and wagged his head.

"Damn dangerous," he said. "Especially on these flags. They wouldn't provide a very secure anchor."

"I warned him," Beverly Flaxman said. "I warned him again and again. It was foolish, to begin with, for him to insist on doing menial work around the place. But Dieter was an obstinate man. After his retirement, the management of the affairs he still kept in hand took only an hour or two of his time a day. The rest of the time he did gardening and repair work and all sorts of odd jobs. Like painting the window frames. He said it gave him a feeling of satisfaction to be doing things with his hands."

"I see. A useful hobby. It does seem, however, that a millionaire could have afforded an adequate ladder. Still, as I understand it, the ladder didn't slip. It toppled over backward."

"Right," said Fuller.

"Show me," said Marcus.

Together, they laid the ladder across the terrace toward the balustrade, guided in the positioning of it by a small brown stain left over from a seepage of blood. Marcus stood thoughtfully over the stain, apparently abstracted, pinching his lower lip.

"Fuller," he said, "had the body been moved when you came to investigate the accident?"

"Yes," Fuller said. "It had been carried into the house and put on a couch in the library. The doctor, who had been called by Miss Dickens, was still here."

"I see." Marcus turned to Beverly Flaxman. "Mrs. Flaxman, who moved the body?"

"I moved him, with the help of Hudson. Hudson Estermay, Mr. Flaxman's nephew. When I ran downstairs, after seeing Dieter's body from the window, I ran into Hudson in the hall. He came out with me."

"Was Dieter Flaxman dead when you arrived?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you move him?"

"I didn't know he was dead then. I thought he was, but I wasn't sure. I couldn't just leave him lying out here on the terrace."

"It would have been wiser if you had. If he had been alive with a severe concussion, chances are he would have been dead by the time you finished carrying him inside. However, that's academic. Sergeant Fuller tells me that you heard no sound, no cry or crash that would

have warned you of the accident."

"That's true."

"The first you knew of it was when you returned to your room and looked out the window and saw your husband's body on the terrace?"

"Yes."

"You had been across the hall in another room?"

"Yes. The hall doors of both rooms were closed. I had a radio on. There's an FM program of symphonic music from two to three in the afternoon that I like. I'm afraid that I like my symphonic music loud. It's easier to distinguish the various instruments. Yesterday they were playing Brahms."

"Why did you go back into your room? Any particular reason?"

"I wanted to do my nails. I came to get the things to do them with."

"And what time was that?"

"As I told Sergenat Fuller, nearly three. The radio program was almost over."

"Good. That all seems straightforward enough. Thank you for your patience, Mrs. Flaxman."

"I believe you said you want to talk with the other members of the household."

"With your permission."

"Whatever you wish. Any preference as to order?"

"You mentioned Hudson Estermay. We may as well start with him."

"Very well. If you will come back into the library, I'll send him to you."

HUDSON ESTERMAY, the deceased gentleman's nephew, was a short man, narrow in the shoulders, thick in the middle, and thin on top. The skin of his face was flaccid, dripping in jowls, and his manner betrayed the faint and uneasy syncophancy of a poor relation who has been permanently conditioned by long residence with a rich one. His pudgy fingers plucked at one another, expressing distress by becoming entangled.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said. "Beverly told me that you want to see me."

Marcus was sitting behind a small table in front of high windows, stretching almost from floor to ceiling, that looked out over the rear grounds of the house. Hudson Estermay had pulled up in front of the table, where he stood uneasily in an aura of dread, like a delinquent urchin hauled to the teacher's desk for a rap across the knuckles. He made Marcus uncomfortable.

"Briefly, Mr. Estermay," said Marcus. "There's no cause for alarm. Won't you sit down?"

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind. I've been so distressed, you see. This terrible accident to Uncle Dieter has upset me dreadfully. I find it quite impossible to sit still."

"I appreciate your feelings. I take it that you and your uncle were quite close."

"I was very fond of him. I have no reason to suspect that he felt otherwise about me."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Yes indeed. For over twenty years. Ever since my mother and father died together in a plane crash. Mother was Uncle Dieter's younger sister."

"I see. What do you do, Mr. Estermay?"

"Do?"

"Yes. What is your occupation?"

"Well, I have no business or profession of my own. Uncle Dieter had many interests, of course; before he retired. I made myself useful to him in countless ways."

"Have you now taken over the active direction of some of his interests?"

"Not precisely. Uncle Dieter was, shall we say, committed to other arrangements."

An errand boy, thought Marcus. A flunky. Hudson Estermay's verbal sparring was clearly employed to evade the bald truth, which was that he had had few responsibilities and practically no ability. A free-loader. His association with the Flaxman enterprises had been primarily restricted to hanging on in hope until the Flaxman will was settled. Having reached that cynical thought, Marcus pursued it.

"Mr. Estermay, your uncle was, I understand, an enormously wealthy man. Do you happen to know the provisions of his will?"

Hudson Estermay jumped as if he had been suddenly stabbed in the rump.

His voice was almost a yelp.

"What? What's that? Why on



earth should you be concerned about Uncle Dieter's will?"

"Well, he was, as I said, an enormously wealthy man. He died suddenly, apparently accidentally, and apparently without witnesses. Under the circumstances, one is inclined to probe a little. It's a kind of public duty, if you see what I mean."

"No, I don't. I don't see at all."

"I'm sorry. The implications are unpleasant, I know. But I asked you about the will's provisions. You haven't answered yet."

"I don't know them. Uncle Dieter did not confide in me. I assume that all the family are provided for."

"Equally?"

"No. Certainly not. The lion's share will surely go to Beverly. After all, she's his wife—"

Hudson Estermay's voice slowed and faded and seemed to drift indeterminately into silence. His little eyes above purple pouches had all at once a blind sheen of cataracts

as he was struck fully by the delicate position of Beverly Flaxman, and by the advantages that might accrue therefrom, with a little luck if not maneuvering, to Hudson Estermay.

Marcus could almost hear the frantic ticking of his feverish little brain. The intrusion of Beverly into the house of Flaxman had not been accomplished, obviously, without inciting resentment. Marcus, convinced of this, did not press.

"All right," he said. "Another question or two, and that'll be all. Where were you and what were you doing when the accident occurred?"

"I was taking a nap. There." Hudson Estermay twisted his thick trunk and pointed. "There on the couch."

"You heard nothing? No shout or crash or anything of the sort?"

"Nothing at all. I didn't wake up until about three. I went out into the hall just in time to meet Beverly hurrying downstairs. She said that Uncle Dieter had had an accident on the terrace, and I went out with her to see about it."

"Good enough. Thank you, Mr. Estermay."

Hudson Estermay turned and went. He was hardly out of the room before Beverly Flaxman came in. She must have been lurking in the hall, Marcus thought sourly.

"I've been trying to find Clay and Veronica," she said. "Clay's Dieter's grandson. Veronica—Veronica Dickens—was his secretary. But they don't seem to be about. I'm sorry."

"Let it go for now," Marcus said. "They may show up later."

"Who would you like to see next?"

"I'll see the servants. Let them come in a group."

"Very well. I've alerted Elwood and Mrs. Doughty and Ellen. They're waiting in the kitchen. Dallas Greeve is probably working outside in the rear. I'll send for him."

"Don't trouble yourself. I can stop and see him for a minute as I leave."

"Just as you wish."

She went for the servants in the kitchen, and Marcus dropped his chin on his chest and closed his eyes. Fuller cursed and bit his tongue. So far as he could see, Marcus was only doing what Fuller had done already. He was now just chopping wood.

Fuller felt that his competence was somehow being impugned, and he naturally resented it. So Fuller cursed and bit his tongue, and Mrs. Doughty and Ellen, herded by Elwood, came into the room. Elwood, as spokesman, approached Marcus's table and coughed discreetly. Marcus opened his eyes.

"Begging your pardon, sir," Elwood said. "You sent for us?"

"Yes." Marcus hitched forward and braced himself at the table on his elbows. "We're investigating Mr. Flaxman's accident, as you know. Where were you, Elwood, when the ladder fell with your master?"

"In the house, sir. More than that, I couldn't say precisely. That is, sir, I

was about my duties. I was moving, so to speak, from here to there."

"You heard nothing? Saw nothing?"

"No, sir. Not until Mr. Flaxman was carried into the house by Mrs. Flaxman and Mr. Estermay."

"You saw no one come down the stairs before Mrs. Flaxman? No one enter the house, from either front or back, during the hour between two and three?"

"No, sir. Not a soul. It is usually very quiet about the house at that time."

Lieutenant Marcus shifted his gaze toward the two women, young and older, who were standing together, as if for comfort or self defense, near the door. "I understand, Mrs. Doughty, that you were in the kitchen at the time in question."

"That I was. Baking I was. Mr. Flaxman was very fond of home-baked goods, he was."

Marcus diverted his attention to Ellen Dorsey, a lean and lanky girl of engaging homeliness with sandy hair, a generous mouth, a flat chest, and a lot of thin thigh showing below the hem of her brief uniform.

"How's your tooth?" Marcus said.

"What?"

"Your tooth. I was told you had an appointment yesterday afternoon with the dentist."

"Oh. Yes, sir. He filled it. It's quite all right now."

"Good. What time was your appointment?"

"Two, sir. I left here at a quarter after one to give myself plenty of time."

"What time did you arrive at the dentist's office?"

"A quarter to two. You can ask the receptionist if you don't believe me."

"Why should I not believe you?"

"No reason. If you want to know how I feel, I can't see any sense to these questions at all. A big fuss over nothing, if you ask me."

"You may be right. Meanwhile, humor me. How long were you in the chair?"

"Twenty minutes, about. He was able to take me a little early, since I was there and waiting. I looked at the clock when I left, and it was ten minutes after two."

"I see. It took you half an hour to get there, so it must have taken you about the same length of time to return. You must have got back here about twenty minutes to three."

"Nothing of the sort."

"Oh? You didn't come straight back?"

"I went around to some shops and bought some things. I had permission. You can ask Mrs. Flaxman if you don't believe me."

"You seem to be obsessed with the fear of not being believed. You should try not to vocalize it, Ellen. It's like a mother telling her children not to stick beans up their noses. Gives a person ideas, I mean, that he wouldn't otherwise have. What time did you get back?"

"Almost four. That was the time I was told. Four o'clock."

"All right. My thanks to all of you. That'll do."

Dismissed, the trio of domestics departed, Elwood in the rear making shooing motions. Marcus rocked back again and closed his eyes.

"Well, Fuller," he said, "what do you think?"

"I think," said Fuller, "that you're doing everything that I've already done, and you're getting just as far as I did, which is nowhere."

Having said it, damn the cost, he felt better. He looked at Marcus with morose satisfaction and was disappointed to note that Marcus was apparently not offended.

"Not nowhere, Fuller. You reached the point of smelling something yesterday, and I smell it today. That's somewhere."

"Smelling and knowing are two different things, and proving is something else again."

"True, Fuller. All too true. When there is a stink, however, it's because something is stinking. In this case, as it happens, there are in fact several things. What we have here, Fuller, is murder. A rash, clumsy, opportunistic murder which was committed in haste and will be repented, I trust, in leisure. But where in hell are the grandson and the secretary? Let us go, Fuller, and roust them out."

WHICH WAS easier said than done. They were not in the house. They were not visible on the

grounds. Beverly Flaxman said that she couldn't for the life of her think where they might be. Marcus asked if it could be assumed that they had gone, wherever they were, together. Beverly Flaxman looked surprised and said no, not at all, that there was no reason whatever to assume that they were together just because they happened to be missing at the same time. Was the question supposed to imply something?

Marcus said it didn't imply anything, necessarily, but that it would surely be convenient if he could, so to speak, get two birds with one stone. While he was waiting for something to throw at, he would fill in the time by talking with Dallas Greeve.

This also started out looking like a problem, for Dallas Greeve was not working behind the house where Beverly Flaxman had thought he was. Perhaps he had gone to his quarters. Where were his quarters? They were above the garage. Marcus was at liberty to try there if he wished. Marcus wished, and he and Fuller went to try.

The garage sheltered a black Imperial, a red Jaguar, an off-white Mustang, and a brown Jeep with a truck bed. At one side, a short flight of stairs went directly up to a small landing. Marcus stood on the landing, Fuller behind him on the stairs, and banged briskly on a door. The door was jerked open immediately following the barrage of bangs.

The young man in the opening was about five feet ten inches tall,

but so burly that he seemed at first glance shorter. The bole of his body was thick, muscular, almost massive. His sturdy legs were short, his arms long. Abundant coarse black hair gave the appearance of a thatch on his head, brushed down in all directions across his skull from the apex of his crown and ending in front, across his broad forehead, in ragged bangs. His face, now distorted by an uncertain scowl, suggested nevertheless the kind of vulnerable amiability and credulity that makes certain men born pigeons for panhandlers and peddlers. The total effect, which might have been simian, strangely wasn't. It was more nearly that of an upright bear.

"What do you want?" he said.

His voice was indolent and vaguely mushy, his enunciation cautious, as if he were at pains to guard against a stammer.

"If you're Dallas Greeve, we want to talk to you a minute about the accident to Mr. Flaxman." Marcus displayed credentials. "I'm Lieutenant Joseph Marcus. Police. You've met Sergeant Fuller, I believe."

"What about the accident?"

"We want your version of it, that's all. Just to complete our report. May we come in?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Dallas Greeve turned and walked away, leaving Marcus to follow, Fuller to follow Marcus and shut the door. They were in the small living room of what was obviously a compact apartment. A thick beige carpet

covered the floor. The walls were paneled with some kind of bleached wood that faked weathering, and the furniture was substantial and compatible.

Among the latter were some comfortable chairs and a matching sofa. Marcus picked a chair and helped himself to it. Dallas Greeve flopped on the sofa, extended his legs and crossed his ankles.

"I don't know nothing about it," he said.

"The accident?"

"That's right. I wasn't ever here."

"So I've been told. You had gone downtown, I believe, to buy more paint for Mr. Flaxman."

"He sent me. Mr. Flaxman did."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know. I didn't pay no attention—any attention."

"You must have some idea."

"Between two and three. Some time around then."

"What time did you get back?"

"I don't know what time it was."

"I see you wear a wrist watch. Looks like a dandy. Don't you ever look at it?"

"Sometimes. I don't always remember what it says."

"Was it before the accident? After?"

"After."

"Had Mr. Flaxman's body been removed from the terrace?"

"Yes. It wasn't there."

"Were you helping Mr. Flaxman paint the window frames?"

"No. He never asked me to. He

was like that. Always wanting to do things himself."

"Did he give you the money to pay for the paint?"

"No. He said to have them bill him. He paid for everything that way. He'd have Miss Dickens make out the checks the first of the month, and he'd sign all of them at once."

"Did you get the paint?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with it?"

"It's downstairs in the garage. Against the wall, just inside the door."

"Was Mr. Flaxman an easy man to work for?"

"He was all right."

"Pay good wages?"

"Good enough. Nothing extra."

"Sometimes servants know more than they're supposed to. They see and hear things. Do you happen to know if Mr. Flaxman was on good terms with all the members of his family?"

"I ain't—I'm not a servant. I got a job here, that's all."

"Sorry. Now answer my question."

"Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. How should I know?"

"Mr. Flaxman was an old man. Mrs. Flaxman is a young woman. Do you think she was happy in her marriage?"

"Mrs. Flaxman don't—doesn't—talk to me about things like that. The only time I ever see her is when I drive her somewhere in the

Imperial. That's the car she uses."

"Is driving a part of your normal duties?"

"I always drive when the Imperial goes out. On errands, like going after the paint, I drive the jeep."

"Thanks. I won't bother you any longer." Marcus stood up and wriggled in a kind of modified spasm of discomfort. "Mind if I use your bathroom?"

Dallas Greeve waved a long arm toward his bathroom door. "Help yourself."

Marcus left, crossing to the door at a gait somewhere between a trot and a jig, and Dallas Greeve uncrossed his ankles and stood up. He brushed an imaginary piece of lint off his lemon-yellow nylon jersey pull-over shirt. Fuller, by the door, watched him in sour silence. A couple of minutes passed. Another minute passed, and here Marcus came, ready to go.

"We've been looking for Clay Flaxman and Veronica Dickens," he said. "Do you happen to know where they are?"

The question was directed, of course, to Dallas Greeve, who suddenly looked sly and somehow salacious, his coarse features splitting in a lax grin that suggested a drool.

"Before I came in," he said, "I saw them heading toward that little house at the foot of the grounds."

"The gazebo? Thanks. I'll have a look. Let's go, Fuller."

They went in file, out the door and down the stairs and outside. On

the broad apron of the drive in front of the garage, Marcus paused.

"Young Mr. Greeve," he said, "has problems with his grammar. But he's working at them. Very commendable."

Fuller, who had his own problems, withheld comment.

"Especially," said Marcus, "in one with a late start and dull tools. You may have marked, Fuller, that Mr. Greeve's wits are not from the top drawer."

"Well," Fuller said, "we can't all be geniuses."

"True. God must have loved the common man, and so on." Marcus sighed as though he found the thought depressing, which in fact he did. "Fuller, you go into the house and see if our quarry has returned in our absence. If not, wait for me. I'll have a look in the gazebo."

THE GAZEBO WAS a smallish structure, with sides of narrow slats crossing each other diagonally to form tiny diamond-shaped apertures. The entrance was on the far side, leaving the near side blind—unless, that is, someone within kept watch toward the house with an eye glued to an aperture. Marcus guessed that Clay Flaxman and Veronica Dickens, if they were there, had better things to do. Nevertheless, approaching across the back lawn, he employed as best he could, without appearing to sneak, the techniques of stealth.

His guess was a good one. They were there, all right, the grandson



and the secretary. And they clearly had better things to do. They were seated together on a wrought iron bench in a condition still somewhat tangled, temporarily up for air.

Young Mr. Flaxman's pale hair was wild. Young Miss Dicken's nylon gams were at least two feet out of an inadequate skirt that had climbed hipward in the skirmish. An aesthetic fellow, impervious to prudery, Marcus thought that they were very pretty gams. A pleasant way, he thought, to celebrate Grandpa's passing.

"Good morning," he said.

Veronica Dickens, naturally startled, yelped and tugged at her skirt and tried to jump up. Clay

Flaxman was made of sterner stuff. He kept his grip on Veronica, holding her firmly in place, and turned his head almost casually to stare at Marcus.

"Who the hell are you?" he said.

Marcus, who was firmly converted to the principle that a good captain never sees a crap game in the barracks, squinted and held a hand above his eyes to suggest that his vision was just now adjusting to the shadows after the bright sunshine without.

"Lieutenant Joseph Marcus. Police."

"Damn the police! What the hell's the idea, sneaking down here to spy? Did you get an eyeful?"

Marcus was offended. Moreover, he was angry. Under the circumstances, however, he was also a good diplomat, which is just another way of saying that he was an accomplished and convincing liar.

"Didn't you hear me coming?" he said. "You must have been pre-occupied. The light is quite dim in here, isn't it? I wasn't certain that the gazebo was occupied."

"Who you looking for?"

"You, I think. Mr. Clay Flaxman?"

"That's me."

Marcus turned his eyes upon the girl, whom he had left in something like privacy to get her skirt down and her aplomb back. She had also escaped Clay Flaxman's clutches and had removed herself a foot or so along the bench.

"Miss Veronica Dickens?"

"Yes."

"Good. I was hoping that I'd find you two together. It'll save time."

"What do you want with us?"

Inside the gazebo, beside the wrought iron bench, there was a built-in seat, a kind of wooden shelf running around the sides. Marcus picked a spot and sat down.

"I want to discuss with you the accident to Mr. Dieter Flaxman," he said.

"What's the fuss about?" Clay Flaxman's voice sounded angry and impatient. "I realize that accidental deaths have to be investigated, but we've already gone through the routine. You got an idea that someone did Grandpa in?"

"We just want to be sure that someone didn't."

"You can take it as a fact. Why would anyone want to kill him?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"Certainly not. The idea's nuts. If you ask me, no one liked him very much, including his charming wife, but I don't believe anyone would have gone to the risk and trouble of killing him, stingy and exasperating as he was."

"I take it that you found your grandfather somewhat less than lovable."

"Was it Clarence Darrow who said that he'd never committed a murder but had read certain obituaries with satisfaction? That sums up my attitude in the family's current bereavement. Now that the old bastard's

dead, maybe I can talk Ronnie into marrying me."

Marcus understood that Ronnie was tenderized Veronica. His personal impression was that the late Dieter Flaxman's secretary was entertaining the thought of just some such action as Clay hoped for. If she wasn't, she ought to be ashamed of herself.

"Did he oppose your marrying Miss Dickens?" he asked.

"That's not quite the way to put it. The other way round is more like it. He was opposed to *her* marrying *me*. Thought she was too good for me, and he was damn well right. But never mind that. I have no scruples against marrying above myself. As you can probably guess, Grandpa and I may be said to have tolerated each other."

"Yet you live here?"

"Why not? It's a roof. It's three squares and a bed. I have every hope and expectation, in the fond memory of my dear dead father, of being remembered adequately in Grandpa's will. Blood, you know, Lieutenant. Thicker than water and all that."

Marcus, frankly, was not sure if Clay Flaxman was a young man of incredible candor or a hellish duplicity. He turned to Veronica Dickens.

"What do you think of all this, Miss Dickens?"

The secretary had now completely regained her composure. Free of the risk of any charge of ogling, Marcus examined her in detail without appearing to do so. The

result was to secure Miss Veronica Dickens high marks for looks. At the same time, Marcus's opinion of Fuller's judgment suffered some slight diminishment.

In his inventory of the characters immediately involved in the Flaxman affair, Fuller had, with full justification, emphasized fervently the superior stuff of Beverly the widow. But he had shamefully neglected the comparable stuff of Veronica the secretary, who surely came in, if not in a dead heat, at least in a photo finish.

Then, looking directly into the eyes that Veronica Dickens levelled at him, Marcus thought he understood. The eyes were large and dark and limpid, swimming under long lashes in myopic shadows, and did not seem to have him quite clearly in focus. That explained it. A thousand to one, thought Marcus, Veronica wore thick glasses when not sleeping, bathing, or otherwise actively engaged.

Fuller, the veteran fuddy-duddy, had been corrupted in his remote youth by the base and tenacious slander that men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses. Fuller had seen Veronica, of course, with goggles on. And he had passed.

"You mustn't mind Clay," Veronica said. "He says things, you know."

"Did Dieter Flaxman oppose your marriage to his grandson?"

"I'm afraid he did. He simply didn't understand Clay."

"What do you think he would have done if you two had married against his wishes?"

"I guess he would have been angry."

"What would he have done? Fired you? Disinherited Clay?"

"Whoa! Hold on!" Clay, interrupting, sounded not so much angry as amused. "You sound as if you were looking for a murder motive. Can you seriously suspect that someone gave Grandpa a shove? That's crazy. In the first place, his death was obviously an accident. In the second place, I was right here in the gazebo when it happened. In the third place, Ronnie was in the old man's office typing some filthy letters."

"What were you doing in the gazebo?"

"Ostensibly I was reading a rotten book. Actually I was waiting in the hope that Ronnie would sneak down and wrestle with me."

"Your candor is refreshing. And confusing. Is it based on your knowledge of your innocence? Or is it intended to suggest innocence by a reckless indifference to evidence of guilt?"

"Guilt of what? Damn it, there's nothing to be guilty of."

"We'll see." Marcus stood up and slapped dust off the seat of his pants. "Thanks for your patience. I'm sorry to have intruded."

He went up the slope of the deep lawn toward the house. On the way, he detoured and entered the garage

again. The gallon of white paint that Dallas Greeve had gone downtown to buy was right where he'd said it was. Marcus, on his way out earlier, had neglected to check. It was sitting against the wall just inside the door beside a coil of light rope. Turning away, Marcus went up the drive and cut across to the back door of the house. He collected Fuller in the kitchen and went on to find Beverly Flaxman in the front hall.

"Mrs. Flaxman," he said, "have you authorized an autopsy on the body of your husband?"

"No." Her voice betrayed no more than a faint inflection of surprise, but a scarlet stain appeared suddenly in each of her cheeks. "I could see no need for one."

"Would you authorize one at my request?"

"Why should I?"

"Because it would expedite things, and would incidentally reflect favorably on you."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean, Mrs. Flaxman, that your husband was murdered." The words were brutal, but the tone was as comforting as a pat on the head. "I'm sorry, but there's no doubt about it."

THE AUTOPSY was mostly remarkable for its negative revelations. Dieter Flaxman had suffered no heart attack, no stroke, no natural physical collapse whatever that would have caused him to take a header backward off his ladder, let

alone to pull the ladder with him. Death had resulted from a cracked skull and attendant hemorrhage. The day of death had been warm, and the medical examiner was conservative. He declined to refine the known truth, which was that death had come between two and three o'clock in the afternoon.

Dieter Flaxman's will was neither negatively remarkable nor positively surprising. Blood, as Clay Flaxman had predicted, had been stronger than water. The estate was impressive, as expected. After a multiplicity of minor charitable bequests, including a modest one to Veronica Dickens and negligible ones to the domestics, the balance of the estate was left to Beverly, Clay, and Hudson Estermay, 50-25-25 percentagewise. Handsome sums. All, given the proper predisposing factors, sufficient motives for murder.

Fuller, briefed on developments, expressed a dim view.

"I don't see," he said, "that it gets us anywhere."

"Don't you, Fuller? Well, at least it helps to make the accident theory more improbable. It and other things."

"What other things?"

"You ought to know, Fuller. You smelled them first."

"I may have smelled them, but I didn't see them, and I still don't."

"Shall I point them out? Let us begin with fundamentals. Ladders, Fuller, do not simply fall over backward. A ladder will fall over back-

ward, even a ladder inclined at such a dangerous angle as this one, only if a person at the top tries deliberately to *make* it fall. By clutching a top rung and heaving his weight backward, for instance. Ladders, when they fall accidentally, fall by toppling sidewise when off balance, or by simply collapsing, so to speak, when the base is insecurely anchored and begins to slip. And ordinarily the action is relatively slow. The person on the ladder has plenty of warning, so that he can ride the ladder most of the way down and jump free at the last second, or at worst, if he loses his cool, jump free immediately and be reasonably sure of suffering nothing worse than a sprained ankle or a broken leg.

"On the other hand, if the ladder is violently *pushed*, especially if it is far too close to being perpendicular, it will fall, as this one did, almost directly backward. Moreover, if it is pushed unexpectedly, the person on the ladder may freeze, clutching the rungs, and bump himself to death when he lands on his back with the ladder on top of him. Especially if he happens to land, as Dieter Flaxman did, on a flagstone terrace. Flagstones, Fuller, are hard."

Fuller's jaw was hanging on its hinges. Letting out a gust of air, he snapped it shut. His voice was a mixture of resignation and despair.

"Mrs. Flaxman," he said.

"Maybe." Marcus shrugged. "Maybe not. From appearances she must certainly be considered a prime

contender. She knew Dieter was on the ladder. She was at hand upstairs. We have only her word for it that she was in a room across the hall. She had more in the way of money to gain from Dieter's death than anyone else. Of course she would have gained it anyhow, eventually, but who knows? Maybe she was in a hurry. Still, we also have only the word of the others that they were where they claim they were. Uncle Hudson napping in the library, for instance, or Clay sitting in the gazebo, or Veronica typing Dieter's filthy letters in the office. One or all could be lying in his teeth.

"Any one of them, say, could have wandered down the hall and, if the door to the bedroom was actually open instead of closed, spotted the old bird on his perch outside the window. Flash! What a wonderful opportunity to knock old Dieter off! You may recall, Fuller, that I said this murder was clumsy and poorly thought out. As a matter of fact, not thought out at all. Have you ever, by any chance, read the enchanting autobiography of George Washington Plunkett?"

"Never even heard of him."

"Few have. A shame. George Washington Plunkett was an old-time Tammany ward-heeler. He distinguished between honest and dishonest graft by explaining that the former was merely seizing an opportunity, like buying a projected public construction site for a song and selling it to the city for a fortune.

The latter, on the contrary, involved felonious thievery, like swiping the lead roof off the court house and selling it as salvage on the open market."

"You tell a good story," said Fuller. "What's the point?"

"Obvious, Fuller. Our impromptu and clumsy murderer did likewise. He seen his opportunity, and he took it. There is something about it, however, that bothers me."

"What's that?"

"That's this. Just how impromptu was this murder? Just how rash can a murderer be? It would have been a simple matter to catch old Dieter unawares, possibly with his head turned or something, and shove the ladder over. With the ladder damn near straight up, even a woman could have done it. Dieter was old, skin and bones practically. Not much weight to him. The murderer probably would even have needed a rod or a pole or anything at all for added projection to get the ladder on the far side of perpendicular. But how could he have been sure that the fall would kill the old man?"

"He couldn't. You said it was an opportunistic murder. Maybe the murderer just acted before he thought. Maybe he didn't take time to weigh the odds."

"Well, it was a hell of a risk, but luck, as it happened, was with him. Anyhow, that's what bothers me. That and something else."

"What else?"

"Something. I'm thinking about

it. When I'm through thinking, I'll let you know."

HE DIDN'T GET through for several days, almost a week. In fact, there was no apparent evidence that he was thinking at all, and it was Fuller's private and sour conviction that he wasn't. For the most part, he went his own way and kept his own counsel, and if he was indeed thinking, the only visible effect, so far as Fuller could see, was to make him as surly as a grizzly with a sore paw.

Marcus began to show, in fact, unmistakable signs of erosion. He became somewhat haggard. Shadows gathered beneath his eyes. His general surliness was punctuated now and again by irascible eruptions. Scarcely sufferable at best, in Fuller's opinion, he became intolerable. At last, having been stung beyond endurance by a caustic snarl that he considered unjust, Fuller fought back.

"By God," he said, "You're getting so damn mean that no one can speak to you. You constipated or something?"

To his surprise, Marcus appeared to be mollified by this evidence of starch. He rocked back in his chair, wiped a hand across his face, and grinned wryly. He looked at the embattled Fuller with a rationed expression of the affection he actually felt.

"Fuller," he said, "you're right. I owe you an apology and an explana-

tion. The truth is, I'm worn out. I've been working long hours."

"I haven't noticed it," said Fuller.

"That's because I've been working nights. Bear with me, Fuller. I've lost a lot of sleep."

"What kind of work?"

"Espionage, Fuller."

"You mean you've been spying on someone?"

"Well put. I've been skulking in the night. I am guilty of the invasion of privacy, of which there is already too precious little left. Dirty work, Fuller, but sometimes, in our seamy profession, necessary. At least I can say I've not been forced to resort to taps, bugs or other kinds of electronic snoops."

"Who you been spying on?"

"You shall see for yourself, Fuller. At any rate, you shall see if my subject cooperates again. Meet me tonight behind the property of the late Dieter Flaxman. You'll remember that the area is undeveloped. Our spying, barring unforeseen prowlers, will not be spied upon."

"What for?"

"As I said; you shall see."

"What time?"

"As close upon nightfall as you can make it. Say nine o'clock."

Marcus thereafter was mute, although more cheerful, and Fuller was left with only the scant satisfaction that speculation could afford him. He went at dusk to the appointed rendezvous, driving most of the way and walking the rest, and arrived in darkness before the noon had risen.

He thought upon arriving that he was first there, but then Marcus separated himself from the trunk of a tree and started without a word toward the high stone wall, some distance away, that marked the lower boundary of the Flaxman property. He pulled up in the shadow of the wall and waited for and waited for Fuller to come abreast.

"Here we are, Fuller," he said. "As you can see, espionage is not all sex and ciphers. Work is involved. Skin up and over. I'll give you a hand if you like."

Fuller preferred to do it himself. He jumped and caught hold of the top of the wall and hauled his grunting bulk up and over, landing on the other side with a considerable thud. Marcus, lighter and more agile, came after him with an expertise that suggested practice. He started off again, and Fuller, trailing, realized that he was heading for the gazebo, some thirty yards away in the direction of the house. It was pitch black inside the structure. Fuller banged a knee against the wrought iron bench and sat down with an anguished growl to drub it.

"Now," said Marcus, "there is nothing to do but wait and watch. The moon will be up shortly, which will be a help. Do you realized how exhausting it is, Fuller, to sit with one eye plastered to one of these little holes for hours on end? Small wonder that I was becoming irritable. Tonight, however, we'll take turns, I'll go first."

"I wonder if it would be too much to ask what the hell we're supposed to be watching for?"

"Not at all, Fuller. We have from here, as you can see if you will take a peek, an unobstructed view of the back door of the Flaxman house. Visibility will become clearer when the moon is up, and I anticipate no action before it is. If our luck is running, we will, in good time, see someone slip out of the house and go down to the garage. You will have to look sharp, because our party moves fast and keeps as much as possible to shadows. Now, Fuller, make yourself comfortable. I'll call you when your turn comes up."

Time crept, and Fuller itched. The itching was particularly persistent during those tedious turns when his eye was plastered to an aperture. But there was no help for it. He scratched and cursed and kept watch.

The moon came up around ten. It floated up the arc of the studded sky and hovered above the Flaxman house. One by one the lights inside the house went out. The house was dark. The backyard was washed with pale light splashed with shadows. Fuller, on duty with an eye at a hole, looked at his watch with the other. Just after one o'clock. Then he grunted with meaning, and Marcus in a flash was with him.

"There she is," Marcus said. "Good eye, Fuller."

The figure they saw was wearing something long and flowing. It seemed to drift across the yard, in

and out of light and shadow, like a piece of cork in the swift current of a silent stream. Now it was there, and now it wasn't. It vanished in the black shadow of the garage.

"Who was it?" said Fuller.

"Who do you think?"

"It could have been Mrs. Flaxman. It could have been Veronica Dickens. It could have been Ellen Dorsey. It sure as hell wasn't Mrs. Doughty."

"You're right. It wasn't Mrs. Doughty."

"Who, then?"

"The time has come, I think, to make a move. Let's go see."

Marcus turned and shot out of the gazebo and Fuller went lumbering after. They cut up across the yard on a diagonal to the garage. The overhead doors to the car ports were all closed and secured, but a small door to one side was unlocked. Marcus went through and up the narrow stairs to the living quarters above. Fuller went up behind him and stood on the stairs just below the landing, while Marcus hammered on the door.

For quite a long time there was no response to the hammering, and then they could hear the thud of feet, bespeaking alarm or anger or both, crossing the floor inside. The door was jerked open, revealing Dallas Greeve in a blue silk dressing gown with Hairy bare shanks showing below. His generous feet were also bare. Marcus had the feeling that he was about to be clobbered without prelude, and he

hoped that Fuller would have the wits to catch him from behind.

"Good morning, Mr. Greeve," Marcus said. "May we come in?"

"Hell, no; you can't come in!"

"Thanks," Marcus said. "That's very kind of you."

He shoved past Dallas Greeve, still wary of a haymaker, and walked a few steps into the room. The only light was from a small lamp on a table near the closed bedroom door. Behind Marcus, Fuller had shoved into the room after him and was glaring at his unwilling host with chin jutting in an open dare. But Dallas Greeve was no longer a menace. The juices had drained out of him.

"What do you want?" he said.

Marcus did not answer him, nor even look at him. Instead, he looked at the bedroom door and, raising his voice, spoke to it.

"Come out, please, Mrs. Flaxman. We want to talk with you."

Beverly Flaxman, after a moment, came. She was wearing a sheer blue robe over a sheer blue gown, and the effect of enchanting transparency was, Marcus thought, a sheer delight. In a sneaking sort of way, he was proud of her. Her head was back, her chin was high, her eyes were hot with scorn.

"Lieutenant Marcus," she said, "you have invaded my home and my privacy. Perhaps I can make you pay."

Marcus shook his head. His voice was sad, almost penitent.

"Sorry, Mrs. Flaxman. You are a

remarkable woman, but you have behaved rashly. When a rich old man is murdered and leaves a young widow, one invariably thinks first of the money motive. And often wrongly. After all, what is money compared to love?" The sadness deepened in his voice. "Or," he amended, "what sometimes passes for love."

She didn't flinch. Her hot eyes held his, and her cheeks were on fire. Her breast rose and remained high and then fell slowly. She seemed, after deliberation, to have reached a decision.

"As you say," she said, "he was an old man, and I was tired of waiting. I didn't want to kill him, but he wouldn't die."

Marcus shook his head again, this time angrily. "It won't do, Mrs. Flaxman. Nice try, but it simply won't do." He jerked around to Dallas Greeve. "You unspeakable oaf, would you really stand by and let her take the rap for you?"

JOE MARCUS next day, sacked in. Having slept almost half around the clock, and having afterward stoked himself with instant coffee and eggs scrambled on a hot plate, he showed up, refreshed and refueled, at approximately three in the afternoon. Fuller was waiting for him. The latter secured himself solidly in Marcus's spare chair, his bulk and his posture, as well as his expression, suggesting a bulldog guarding a bone. He was clearly there for satisfaction,

and he intended to sit there until he got it.

"What I still can't see," he said, "is how you knew it was Dallas Greeve. Why not Mrs. Flaxman?"

"Because," said Marcus, "there was no paint on the terrace."

"Paint?"

"Right, Fuller. Paint. Reflect a moment. Why would a man be up on top of a ladder to paint a window frame without any paint? The answer is, he wouldn't. So the answer poses another question. What the hell happened to the paint? When the ladder fell, did the bucket of paint detach itself and float gently down to the terrace, landing upright and spilling nary a drop? Is that plausible?"

"It isn't, and you know damn well it isn't."

"True. So what's the answer? The bucket of paint was obviously not up on the ladder with old Dieter, and therefore did not fall. But it *had* been up there, because Dieter had been painting and had actually finished part of the frame. So how did it get down? You remember the bucket, Fuller? It was getting empty, having only an inch or two of paint left in the bottom. It seemed elementary to me that the bucket was down on the terrace for refilling from the bigger bucket. But Dieter did not carry it down, because Dieter was still up.

"It was down, Fuller, because Dieter had sent it down. He had lowered it, in brief, at the end of a

light rope attached to the top rung of the ladder. A rope, incidentally, which I found coiled in the garage. Dieter, as we keep repeating, was an old man. It was precarious enough getting himself up and down a ladder without lugging a bucket of paint in one hand and a brush in the other. Therefore, he tied the bucket to the rope, climbed the ladder, and hauled the bucket up after. Going down, of course, he simply let the bucket down ahead."

"Neat. Fancy thinking. But where does it get us?"

"It gets us, Fuller, to a second party. It gets us to someone below who was supposed to fill the bucket. It gets us to the murderer, Fuller. It gets us to Dallas Greeve."

"Why Dallas, necessarily?"

"Can you think of anyone more likely? Besides being the chauffeur, he was yardman, wasn't he? Think, Fuller. Use your imagination. Here's old Dieter on top of his ladder. Here comes Dallas across the terrace for one reason or another. 'Greeve,' says Dieter, 'I'm low on paint. Run downtown and buy another gallon. Before you leave, however, fill my bucket please.' So there they were, Dieter up and Dallas down, and that rope hanging in front of the latter's eyes like hell's own temptation.

"I told you that this was a clumsy, opportunistic murder, Fuller. Dallas Greeve simply grabbed that rope and lunged backward, and down came Dieter, ladder and all. Maybe the fall was fatal, maybe it

wasn't. If not, Dallas was right there to give the old man's head an extra bump or two against the terrace. Dallas, poor fellow, is a very stupid specimen. He did have wits enough to see the significance of the rope and remove it. But it didn't occur to him that someone else might have wits enough to postulate the rope, there or not, on the basis of other evidence. Stupid but lucky, that was our Dallas.

"The only witness to his impromptu murder was Beverly Flaxman, who saw it from the window of her room, and she wasn't about to tell. Dallas went tearing off on an errand which was supposed to be an alibi, or a piece of one, and Beverly went off to the room across the hall, where she listened to Brahms, and came back later to discover the 'accident.' I'm sorry to tell you, Fuller, that Beverly is not exactly a nice person. She is not only an accessory after the fact, but she is also the motive. If it hadn't been for her, the murder would never have been committed. As it was, Dallas Greeve, like George Washington Plunkett, seen his opportunity and took it."

Poor Fuller wagged his head sadly. He looked stunned and crushed, his orderly notions of romantic rightness in shambles.

"I guess he was her lover, all right, or she wouldn't have sneaked out to meet him practically naked in the middle of the night. But I don't understand it. Damned if I can

understand it. That knockout of a woman, money and education and everything, and that ugly, stupid, illiterate lout! She must have been out of her head or something, to take the risk of sneaking out there like she did just to crawl into the hay with him."

"Passion ignores discretion, Fuller. There's another expression that makes the point better, but it's too dirty for your ears. Anyhow, if the Flaxman-Greeve relationship taxes your credulity, I recommend that you drop in at the public library and read up on the Rattenbury case. It happened in England about three decades ago. Alma Rattenbury was a beautiful woman. Very refined. She even wrote music or poetry or something like that. She was married to a wealthy architect, older than she, and eventually they acquired a certain servant. An eighteen-year-old lout named George Percy Stoner. Crude, ignorant, dull-witted.

"Incredible as it might seem, Alma got hot for George Percy, and George Percy got delusions of grandeur and ended up knocking the brains out of Francis Rattenbury. Francis was the husband, you understand. Alma was loyal to her lover, but George Percy was executed. Alma committed suicide, more in grief for George Percy, we have every reason to believe, than in guilt for Francis. So there you are, Fuller. Judges find precedent useful, and sometimes so do cops."

"All right. You don't have to rub

my nose in it. I didn't suspect, and you did. Maybe you'll tell me why."

"There was evidence all over the place, Fuller. The trouble with you is, you wear a white hat. You're a good guy, Fuller, essentially innocent. You needed a nasty mind, like mine. You were in Greeve's quarters. Didn't it occur to you that they were much too luxuriously furnished for a yardman-chauffeur? Maybe you remember that I went to take a leak. Ostensibly. What I actually did was poke in drawers and the closet. Expensive clothes, Fuller. Silk underwear. Loads of them.

"He was wearing a watch that must have cost at least a hundred bucks, and he was loafing around in a nylon jersey shirt at a time when you'd have expected him to be out working. Not the quarters or the wardrobe or the department of an ordinary servant. He was obviously someone's pet, and I was willing to be a hundred to one that he wasn't Dieter's. But there was something else that put the lid on. Dallas kept making egregious grammatical errors. Nothing odd about that. Illiterate louts do. What was odd was that *he invariably corrected himself*. Someone was *tutoring* him. Someone, Fuller, was trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Fuller sighed and slapped his knees and stood up. He mumbled something commendatory and shambled out. He was feeling disillusioned and depressed. He was feeling very much like a sow's ear himself.



A REASON TO KILL

by HAL ELLSON

Only one man could have fired that fatal shot. Yet four of that sullen group had good reason to kill. Which one was it? Fiala smiled grimly. For, you see—

A HUNDRED in the shade, very little shade and a call from Lopez at headquarters.

An important matter. How important? Victor Fiala wondered,

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knowing the chief. A hundred in the shade of the municipal building's patio, and now the iron steps to the balcony. The steep climb that he'd always hated, higher than Everest—and at the top the real Abominable Snowman himself, who ate detectives alive.

Breathing heavily, Fiala reached the balcony, rested, knocked on the chief's door and walked in.

Lopez was at his desk, pale as always, a thick unlighted cigar stuck dead-center in his mouth, his black eyes hooded, forehead creased.

A bad sign.

"Hot, Victor?" The black eyes gleamed. A nod to the desk where an open letter lay. "Read that and you'll be hotter."

Fiala picked up the letter, scanned it, put down and raised his eyes. Pronounce judgement?

"It looks like the real thing," he said.

Confirmation from Lopez? He'd rather argue first. "An anonymous letter. Always hard to take them seriously, Victor. And this one! A madman must have written it!"

"Mendoza has enough enemies to include a madman among them."

"No doubt, but who would have the courage to kill him?"

"It's not a question of courage. Sooner or later, someone was bound to act."

Lopez nodded, as if in agreement. "And tell us exactly when and where he intends to kill his victim?"

"Unusual," Fiala admitted. "But

possible. I think Mendoza should be warned."

"It would be nice if we could forget the matter, but—" Lopez shrugged and grinned. "Will you take care of the matter, Victor? I know..."

A half hour later, Miguel Mendoza looked up from the booth in the cantina. "Ah, Victor Fiala, my old friend. What have I done now?"

"This time nothing," Fiala answered, unsmiling. "We received an anonymous letter at headquarters. Someone intends to kill you."

Frightened? Mendoza laughed. "The best I've heard in a long while. No one kills me. But many thanks for the warning. Ah, the police aren't as bad as they're painted. A drink, Senor?"

Fiala declined the offer, left and returned to headquarters.

"Well?" said Lopez.

"As expected. A waste of time," Fiala explained. "Quote: *No one kills Mendoza.*"

"He's probably right."

"Perhaps, but we've got to prepare ourselves."

Lopez wiped his sweating face, lit his cigar and said, "You're so sure something's going to happen, I'll let you take care of the matter."

Fiala left and made the arrangements—an ironic situation—to protect a murderer from being murdered. A waste of time. Nothing happened, and the police went back to their regular duties.

On the following day a second

letter arrived, and Fiala was called to the chief's office. The letter was given him. He read it, handed it back. His opinion remained unchanged. Someone intended to kill Mendoza.

"And what about yesterday?" Lopez said. "Nothing happened."

"Something must have gone amiss."

"Or the killer lost his nerve."

"Possibly. Mendoza's a tough one to tackle."

"But you still think—"

"He has plenty of real enemies. How many men did he kill for Fuente? A dozen? How many fathers and brothers are waiting to avenge the victims?"

"If he did kill—"

"Everyone in Montes knows the blood he's spilled."

Lopez shrugged. "But the letter. Why would the writer tell us the place and time he intends to murder Mendoza?"

"Perhaps he expects to pull it off under our noses and get away with it."

"In the main plaza at five in the evening? Impossible."

Poor Lopez. Fiala smiled. "It's simple if you think about it. A man with a rifle can stand in a window of the San Francisco Hotel and put a bullet through another man's head on the other side of the plaza. Or—"

"Enough," said Lopez. "We'll have to warn Mendoza again."

"A bit late." Fiala glanced at his watch. "Eight minutes to five.

Besides, if he didn't take us seriously yesterday, he certainly won't now."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Cover the plaza again. Perhaps we can head this thing off, but I doubt it." Fiala picked up the phone and handed it to Lopez. "I'm leaving. Call Captain Meza and have him ready the men."

THE FIRE OF the sun was still burning the walks of the plaza and wilting its green. Here and there an old man sat on a bench staring at nothing, a few shoe-shine boys and the usual beggars in front of the Cathedral. Hardly a scene for murder, and no sign of the intended victim. As for the assassin—

Fiala checked his watch. One minute of five. Sixty seconds and the killer would strike. The scene belied this; the police covering the plaza were bored and irritated. Nothing would happen.

Thirty seconds to the hour. From the bandstand in the center of the plaza Fiala looked around. No sign of Mendoza. Ten seconds to the hour. A glance at his watch and he began to count—*Nine-Eight-Seven*. His eyes swept the plaza, no activity, not a leaf stirring. *Six-Five-Four*. An old man arose from a bench and sat again. *Three-Two-One!*

Silence in the plaza. Another false alarm. So be it. Fiala let out his breath, and Captain Meza, stepping from behind a column fronting the San Francisco Hotel, waved. A gesture of disgust? Fiala shrugged.

Captain Meza wiped his face with a handkerchief, started across the gutter and a shot rang out.

Then silence in the plaza, the old men and shoe-shines stricken. All eyes focused on the cantina opposite the San Francisco. The shot from there. The assassin had kept his word. Two doors through which he could escape, the same for a pellmell exodus of frightened witnesses. Neither door opened, no one bolted, not a sound came from the cantina—a condition so unexpected it lulled the police.

Even Fiala fell victim to the spell, but finally he moved, and police appeared from everywhere to converge on the cantina. Last through the door stepped Fiala, and a strange scene met his eye. Nothing seemed out of order. The cantina's patrons sat calmly at their tables, the barman, arms folded, blandly puffed on a cigarette.

All eyes focused on Victor Fiala. Slowly his gaze swept the barroom, the side door."

A pistol there, black barrel streaked with light. The assassin's weapon. Where was the victim? He cocked his head. The occupant of the booth adjoining the side door appeared to be dozing, his head rested on the table. Stupified with liquor? An aura of silence encircled the booth. Here was the victim, Miguel Mendoza, who'd lived by the gun and—

Fiala went to the booth, looked down. A pack of cigarettes on the

table, half-empty glass of brandy. He grasped the gunman's black silken hair, held back his head, saw where the bullet had found its mark and lowered the victim's head.

He turned. Five patrons and the barman. One way or another, all were known to him. Five witnesses, and the killer. But who would point his finger at the one who'd gunned Mendoza down? Six men watching him and none marked by guilt; they almost appeared indifferent.

Fiala addressed the barman first. "What happened, Pancho?"

A shrug. "I don't know. I was mixing a drink, heard a shot and saw nothing."

The expected reply and a bad beginning. Pancho was lying, but probably in the clear. He had no score to settle with Mendoza.

"Senor Cruz." Fiala nodded to an elderly man of slight physique and sickly pallor. "Let's hear from you. What happened?"

A shrug. "Someone shot Mendoza."

"You witnessed this?"

"No."

"Ah, you were sitting right there, but your eyes were closed."

"I saw nothing. The shot came from outside. The gunman fired from the side-door."

Fiala nodded to the weapon on the floor. "Then what's that doing in here?"

"The gunman tossed it there."

A lie so outrageous that Fiala wanted to laugh, but all he did was

shake his head. "There was no gunman outside. We were watching both doors. We also know that no one left here after the shot was fired."

The last was directed at Cruz, but intended for the ears of all.

There was no response from them. Set-faced, they stared at him. He let out his breath. The truth buried among them. Lies. An avalanche of lies was all he could expect. They wouldn't admit anything, not even Cruz, the old one, the weak one, his friend of many years and now—

"Let's begin again," he said to Cruz. "What happened?"

"Exactly what I told you. The shot came from outside. Then—"

"Enough. Don't make me throw up."

"Let me handle him," Captain Meza said, stepping forward. "I'll make him talk."

"I'm sure you can, but permit me."

Put in his place, Meza flushed, and Fiala turned to the witnesses—Quevedo, Costa, Limon, Castillo. The tough ones. Which of them had put an end to Mendoza's bloody career? All were capable, and all had reason.

Quevedo had lost a son to him, as had Costa. Limon and Castillo each a brother. His sympathies were with them, but—

He turned to Quevedo, a gaunt man whose sunburned face was incised with an incredible network of wrinkles. "Senor Quevedo, what happened?"

"I don't know. I saw nothing."

A shrug and Fiala turned to Costa. Fire slumbered in his black eyes; he was as gaunt as Quevedo, and pale as Quevedo was dark.

"I saw nothing," he said to Fiala's question.

"Senor Limon?" Limon was young, running to fat, his soft round expressionless face save him a harmless look. He was part Indian, a troublemaker when drunk. At the moment he was perfectly sober. He'd seen nothing.

Four negatives, but expected. Fiala gave his attention to Quevedo again, and Chief Lopez entered the cantina.

"Where's Mendoza?" he asked.

Fiala nodded to the booth. Lopez stared, puzzled. "Dead?"

"Yes. We don't know who did it. I was seeking the answer when you came in. If you care to take over—"

"No, continue." Lopez backed away, and once more Fiala turned to Quevedo. "When the shot was fired, you were sitting in that chair?"

"Yes."

"Costa, you were sitting where you are now?"

Costa nodded. He hadn't moved an inch. Likewise Castillo and Limon.

Four men, four similar replies. Fiala let out his breath and turned to Pancho behind the bar. "Were these men sitting as they said they were?"

"They were," said Pancho.

"And no one moved after the shot was fired?"

"No one moved."

Fiala nodded. Sweat dripped from him, but he'd forgotten the deadly heat. Nothing existed but this bar-room where murder had been done. A dead man slept with his head on a table, the killer and witnesses all were present and placed. If this was the truth, if each man had been sitting where he now sat—

Fiala glanced at Cruz. The old man's forehead a gleam with sweat, his breath rasping. A good matador long ago, pitiful now. Spare him the questions. Concentrate on the others, the tough ones, those tied by blood to the crime.

He turned, stared at the gun. Any of the four could have fired it from where he sat and tossed it on the floor. He stooped to pick it up.

"Don't handle it," Captain Meza warned.

"You object?" Fiala raised his brows, and the captain turned to Lopez. "There may be fingerprints. If he—"

"That's for me to decide," Fiala put in quickly. "There are no fingerprints."

"You know this?"

Fiala turned to Lopez. "It was my impression that I was asking the questions here. If I've been mistaken—"

"Continue the interrogation," Lopez snapped. "There'll be no more interruptions."

Fiala bowed, picked up the gun, examined it, removed the remaining shells and looked up at Quevedo.



"This is not your gun, Senor?"

"No."

"And you never fired it?"

"Never."

"But you might have. In fact, from where you're sitting you could easily have shot Mendoza."

Fiala was advancing as he spoke, the hand holding the gun slightly extended. Now he reached the table, and Quevedo frowned, obviously puzzled.

"Here, please take this and aim at Mendoza."

Quevedo sat motionless, a stubborn angry man who felt on the edge of a trap.

"Take the gun," Fiala said softly. "For your own good."

Reluctantly Quevedo accepted it, lifted his arm and aimed.

"Steady now." Fiala took hold of his wrist. "That's it."

Costa next. The same questions, same replies; it wasn't his gun, he'd never laid hand on it, but from where he sat—

"Here." Fiala presented the gun. "Aim at Mendoza."

Suspicious, but less stubborn than Quevedo. Costa accepted the weapon and took aim, while Fiala held his wrist.

"Enough, Senor."

Limon's turn. He went through the routine, gave back the gun. Now Castillo. He accepted his role with silent contempt.

Dripping sweat, Fiala let out his breath. The four tough ones finished with. He went to the center of the room. looked from one to the other. Quevedo? Costa? Limon? Castillo? Which one the assassin? Each had lost a blood-relative to Mendoza, and each could have shot him from where he sat.

Which one? Fiala wondered, and behind him Lopez coughed. The chief was getting impatient. Soon he'd be making demands, and Captain Meza—"Senor Cruz."

Fiala hadn't forgotten the old man, the weak and sickly one, his friend of many years. He walked toward him. The questions again. Cruz answered them quickly. The gun wasn't his; he hadn't fired it.

"You're wasting your time," he added. "The one who killed Mendoza isn't here. The shot came from the side door."

Lopez nodded. "Someone could have fired from there and walked away in the excitement."

A remote possibility. Fiala shrugged, and Lopez said, "You've wasted a lot of time. I suggest you look for another man."

"I doubt if he exists, but we can soon find out. An old man was sitting on a bench directly across the street when the shot was fired."

"Bring him in," Lopez ordered one of the policemen.

The old man was brought and questioned. Yes, he'd been sitting on the bench when the shot was fired. No, he hadn't seen any one at the side door.

"Back to where we started," Lopez said angrily. "Lock them all up."

"That won't be necessary," Fiala pointed out. "They all claim innocence, so no one is going to run and give himself away."

"All right. Let them go." Lopez went to the door, turned and signaled for Fiala to follow.

They crossed the plaza to headquarters in silence. In his office, Lopez bit the end off a cigar and shook his head. "Very bad. The papers are going to make us look foolish tomorrow."

"If you had let me continue—"

"You were getting nowhere."

"If I had finished with Cruz."

"You suspect the old man? He's too weak to lift a gun."

"Perhaps," said Fiala, "but I think he's the one."

"And your reason?"

"His lie about the killer firing from the side door. If you'll recall, none of the others saw the man. I think Cruz invented him to cover up."

A knock sounded on the door and Captain Meza entered, a grin on his face. "I think we have our man," he announced. "A tip from a good source. Pancho. He was deeply in debt to Mendoza, and Mendoza had threatened him."

"There goes your suspect," Lopez said, turning to Fiala.

Calmly Victor Fiala shook his head.

"I knew about the gambling debt and the threat," he answered. "That was usual with Mendoza, but Pancho didn't kill him. Cruz did."

"You must be joking," said Captain Meza.

"Hardly." Fiala turned to Lopez. "If I may finish with the old man—"

Lopez hesitated, conceded and Cruz was sent for. The old man was obviously frightened and began to protest, but Fiala stopped him abruptly. The death gun lay on Lopez' desk. He was told to pick it up and aim across the room. He did as told and, Fiala holding his wrist, finally let go.

"Mendoza's murderer," he announced flatly.

Silence, then a painful sob from Cruz and all eyes focused on the old man. The sobbing suddenly stopped and Cruz looked up, lips trembling.

"It's true," he said. "I killed Mendoza."

A nod to Captain Meza and Cruz was taken away. Lopez turned to Fiala. "All right, you win, but what made you suspect Cruz when the others had reason to kill Mendoza?"

"So did the old man," Fiala replied. "In a way, he had more reason than the others. Remember the young lawyer Vasquez who was found with a bullet in his head in back of the airfield three years ago? Rumor said it was Mendoza's work. I'm sure it was."

"So?"

"Cruz' daughter was engaged to marry Vasquez."

"All right, that made you suspect the old man, but how did you know he killed Mendoza?"

"You followed the proceedings, saw how I had each man point the gun. You also saw me hold each man's wrist. My purpose was other than it appeared. As I held each man's wrist, I felt his pulse. All were rapid, but Cruz'— It was like holding his heart in my hand. That's how I knew."

"Clever," said Lopez, "but you still didn't know. You were guessing."

Fiala smiled. "A pretty good guess, no? Besides, the accusation worked. Now if you'll excuse me, I've an appointment at the Black Cat."

"Don't drink too much," Lopez growled as Victor Fiala went out the door.

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To die, it is not easy. But to live on, with the scar of murder branded on your soul and in your heart—may not that be the worst of all?

WHERE AM I?

by JACK RITCHIE

MIKE AND I watched him for about fifteen minutes.

"He's not doing anything," Mike said. "Just standing there."

I threw away my cigarette. "Let's go over and talk to him."

He was a tall, gaunt man who stood to one side, not interfering with the flow of customers in and out of the department store.

I showed my badge. "Are you especially interested in anything across the street?"

His eyes returned to the people passing. "No."

"Like that jewelry store?" I asked.

"No."

"The manager thinks you are," Mike said. "It worried him enough so that he called us."

"He wasted a dime."

"How long have you been standing here?" I asked.

For a while I didn't think he was going to do us the favor of answering, but then he said, "Since nine."

"I mean how many days?"

Now he looked at me. "None of your business."

Mike took the cigar out of his mouth. "According to the manager, you've been standing in this same spot for the last three days. He thinks you might be planning some kind of surprise for his store."

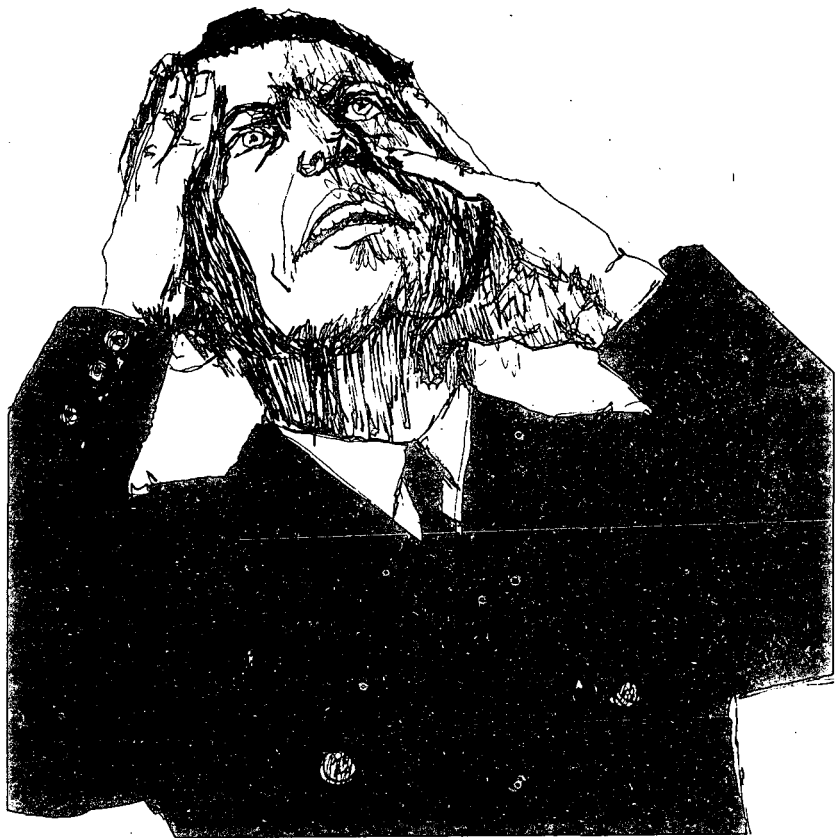
"Tell him to stop worrying."

I patted him down and found a .45 automatic in his topcoat pocket.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He didn't say anything.

"Let's see your wallet," Mike



said firmly. "Take your money out first."

He hesitated, but then did as he was told.

Mike looked through the billfold—"Well, you got the wallet of somebody named James Ryker and he comes from Madison. What brings you back to this spot day after day?"

"That's my business.

I put the .45 into my coat pocket. "You'd better come along with us."

He glared. "On what charge?"

"Carrying a concealed weapon. Does that seem strong enough to you?"

At headquarters, Mike dropped off at the communications center, while I took Ryker up to one of the empty interrogation rooms. I pointed

to a stack of magazines. "Sit down and help yourself. You might be here sometime."

I read a couple of articles myself before Mike joined us again.

Mike is a comfortably fed man with child-sincere eyes. He unwrapped a fresh cigar. "According to the Madison police, James Ryker is an engineer with Drahne Electronics in that city and lives at 416 Fennel Street. One week ago he reported that his wife Magda was missing. When they investigated, they found that she was last seen leaving Ryker's home carrying two suitcases. She got into a sedan parked at the curb and the man at the wheel, according to a witness, wasn't her husband."

Ryker's face darkened.

Mike studied him. "The Madison police say that you claim you don't know who the man was."

Ryker's temper broke.

"I don't. I never even knew that he existed."

Mike deciphered a line in his notebook. "The witness, who happens to be a neighbor, says the sedan had Wisconsin license plates. She remembers the last three numbers because they were all the same—444." He looked up. "Would you please empty your pockets on the table there."

Ryker glared, but did as he was told.

Mike picked up an envelope from the pile and pulled out the plain notepaper.

I read over his shoulder.

Jim, I'm sorry it had to end this way. Don't bother to look for me. I wouldn't come back under any circumstances.

Magda

Mike examined the envelope. "Postmarked here in Milwaukee, four days ago." He looked at Ryker. "Am I guessing wild when I say that you're out to get her? Or him? Or *both* of them?"

Ryker picked up a magazine and decided to get interested in printing.

Mike and I left him sitting there and went into the hall for a conference.

"She must have kept her love life a deep dark secret Mike said." If he really doesn't have any idea who the man is, "So now his only bet is to stand on a street corner in Milwaukee and hope that some day he'll see her pass? Those are pretty long odds."

"Maybe, and maybe not. How often do you figure the average woman goes downtown to shop?"

"Once a month?" Mike speculated.

"So if Ryker stands on the busiest corner downtown and waits, there's a good chance that he'll see his wife sometime. In a month. Two months. Any time."

"If she's in Milwaukee. Suppose she was just passing through and that's how come the letter was postmarked from here."

"Maybe. But this is all that Ryker's got to work on and he's doing it. He may be right."

"So what do we do? Taking away his automatic isn't the answer. If he's really got his mind set, all he has to do is walk into any gun shop and buy himself another one."

I agreed. "We'll have to find her before he does. I don't suppose Madison made up a list of license plates ending in 444?"

"I doubt it. This is just a runaway wife thing as far as they're concerned. Ninety-five percent of the time they come back within a week and so there's no point in working up sweat unless something serious develops. But knowing what we know do, we'd better get in touch with the Motor Vehicle Department."

Mike went back downstairs to the communications center and I rejoined Ryker.

I sat down. "So there you were, standing on that corner on the off-chance that some day you'd see your wife again? Were you going to shoot her down on the spot?"

He firmly turned a page of his magazine.

"How long were you going to stay on that corner?" I asked. "Months? Years? Suppose she isn't even in Milwaukee? You'd be making one big public fool out of yourself, wouldn't you? And what are you going to tell the reporters?"

That made him look up. "Reporters? What reporters?"

"They'll smell out this story," I said. "They'll get a look at the blotter and ask me what it's all



about. They will want all of the details."

Ryker ran his tongue over his lips.

I took a slow puff from my cigarette. "Your friends, your relatives, they'll think you're some kind of a nut, now, won't they?"

I let time tick away and I could see that he was working up to some kind of a decision.

Finally he swallowed. He did a pretty good job of making his eyes look blank. "Where am I? Who am I?"

Mike opened the door and came in. "How are things?"

"He just developed amnesia," I said.

Mike sighed. "Another one? That makes fourteen this year."

"They all think they're being original," I said. "When they get backed into a corner they all think a nice case of amnesia will explain everything." I clicked my tongue. "It's the coward's way out, Ryker. The coward's way. You got to stand up and face reality."

Ryker flushed and looked away.

Mike frowned in my direction. "Sometimes I think you push a little too hard, Bill." He turned back to Ryker. "You don't really have amnesia, now do you?"

"No," Ryker snapped.

Mike nodded approvingly. "Well, we got that much settled. And now, in your own words, can you tell us just why you were standing on that corner?"

Ryker's lips tightened. "I'm not saying another damn thing."

And that was that, as far as Ryker was concerned. We tried, but he wasn't doing any more talking.

Mike finally sighed and looked out of the window at the gray sky. "Looks like it might snow. Hope the stuff stays on the ground."

He was thinking about tracking and the deer season starting tomorrow.

"No," Mike said. "I don't care much for night driving. I'll start the first thing in the morning."

Our phone buzzed and it was Communications saying that it had the list from the Motor Vehicle Department.

I left Mike and Ryker and went downstairs.

At Communications I picked up the list and as I riffled through the pages, I found a grin and an idea forming.

I sat down at one of the typewriters and added another name to the list.

Back upstairs, I sat down and lit a cigarette. I turned a page, studied it, and then looked up. "Ever been to Madison, Mike?"

"Sure," he said. "Off and on. Got a sister who lives there. Thought I told you that."

"Know where Fennel Street is?"

"Yeah."

I took a few puffs on the cigarette before I spoke again. "You drive a sedan, don't you?"

He looked at me, slightly puzzled. "You know it. Why?"

I shrugged. "What's your license number?"

He gave it a second's thought. "Damn if I remember."

I shook my head. "And you a cop. Suppose somebody stole your car?"

He scratched his head. "Who remembers his license plate number? Even cops. I'd have to look it up somewhere."

Once again I silently scanned the sheets.

"Why the questions?"

I ground out my cigarette in the ashtray. "Your name happens to be on this list. I guess your license plate ends in 444."

He came over and stared at the spot where my finger pointed.

"Just a coincidence," I said. "I'll cross it off."

"Sure," Mike said.

I picked up a pencil, but then hesitated. "Mike, just for the record, where were you on the afternoon of November 16th?"

His eyes went to the wall calendar. "That was my regular day off."

Ryker had been listening and now his eyes narrowed. "Fennel Street is only four blocks long. Not many people outside of Madison ever heard of it."

Mike colored slightly. "Cross my name off, Bill. It's just a coincidence. There are six hundred other people on that list."

I agreed and elaborately eliminated his name.

Ryker got to his feet. "Just because he's a cop, you think that he couldn't be the one?"

I regarded him coldly. "Look, mister, I've known Mike for years. He's straight as they come. Now sit down."

There was silence for a while.

"So my license plate ends in 444," Mike said. That could happen to anybody. And millions of people drive sedans."

I nodded.

Mike seemed a little warm. "So I go to Madison every once in a while

and I know where Fennel Street is. It's a free country."

Ryker stared at him for a while and then got to his feet again. "Book me or something. I'm tired of sitting here."

I glanced at my watch. Nearly five.

"All right," I said.

We took Ryker downstairs and had him booked on the concealed gun charge. He gave his address as the Crestview Hotel and was released on a five hundred dollar bond.

We walked him to the street.

"The smart thing to do, Ryker," I said, "is to go back to Madison and forget the whole project."

He almost created a smile. "And forfeit my bond? Is a cop giving me that kind of advice?" He buttoned his topcoat and regarded Mike stonily. "I'd swear I saw you some place before."

Mike flushed again. "Not that I know of."

We watched Ryker go. When he crossed Tenth Street, Acting Detective Klein stepped out of a doorway and followed inconspicuously half a block behind.

At five, Mike and I signed out and walked to the municipal parking lot.

When we got to his car, he stopped and scratched his head. "Hey, my license plate doesn't end in 444!"

I showed innocent interest. "Really? Are you positive that's your car?"

"Well, sure," he said, a little

uncertainly. "I mean there's that dent in the left fender and that gouge on the side there—" He stopped as he caught my grin.

For the third time in the last half an hour, his face reddened. He sputtered for ten seconds before he could talk. "One of these days one of those jokes of yours is going to backfire."

The next morning a cold mist covered the city when I checked in at headquarters.

Sergeant Peters, Mike's replacement for the weekend, sat at our desk studying a report. "This guy Ryker bought himself a pistol at the Acme Sports Shop right after he left here yesterday. And ammunition."

I rapped a pack of cigarettes out of the carton in our desk. "So what did Klein do about that?"

"What could he do? It's not against the law to buy a gun. And Ryker carried it away from the store in a sealed box, so that doesn't qualify it as a concealed weapon." He glanced at the report again. "Ryker had a meal at Mader's Restaurant and then made a phone call. Klein thinks he came out of the phone booth smiling, but he isn't sure."

I tried to imagine Ryker smiling and I could see why Klein wasn't certain.

Peters put down the report. "Anyway, Ryker left Mader's and that's when Klein lost him."

I paused in the act of lighting my cigarette. "Lost him?"

"It happens sometimes. It was one of those downtown bargain nights and there were crowds and the next thing Klein knew Ryker disappeared."

"Maybe he went back to his hotel?"

"That's what Klein thought. So he went over to the Crestview and waited. But Ryker didn't show up. Still hasn't."

"So now Ryker's wandering around somewhere with a loaded gun?"

Peters nodded. "And looking for his wife."

Or somebody else, I thought.

I reached for my desk phone, but then decided I wanted my call to be private.

"Be back in a minute," I said.

Out in the hall, I stepped into a phone booth and pulled the door shut. I dialed Mike's number and got his landlady on the line.

"Is Mike still there?" I asked.

"Why no," she said. "He left last night."

I felt some relief that Mike was out of the city, but I said, "He told me he wasn't leaving until this morning."

She might have shrugged. "Didn't say anything to me about his plans and I can't read his mind. Maybe he decided to leave last night because the weather was holding good and the weatherman promised rain for today."

I was about to hang up, but then she said, "He left right after getting a

telephone call. He was supposed to meet somebody. The name was Wyker, I think."

Wyker? "Could it have been Ryker?"

"That might be it. I remember hearing the name mentioned while Mike was on the phone. I don't like to listen too hard to other people telephone calls."

The telephone booth seemed a little warm. "What time did Mike leave?"

"About seven."

"Alone?"

"From here, at least."

"Did he say exactly where he was going?"

"Not when he left. But I do know that he was planning to go hunting up near River Falls."

"Did he mentioned a hotel or motel?"

"Not to me. I suppose there must be dozens around there."

I thanked her and hung up.

River Falls? That was at least two hundred fifty miles north. Mike would get his car gassed up and checked before he left on a trip like that. Didn't he usually go to the station on Twenty-third and Atkinson? Bill's Standard?

I went to the yellow pages of the telephone book and discovered eight Bill's Standards, but narrowed that down by checking the addresses.

When the Bill I wanted answered the phone, I identified myself as a friend of Mike's. "Did he stop there last night?"

Bill gave the question thought. "Yeah. Going hunting, I think. Filled his tank and gave him a quart of oil. He was with this other guy."

"Other guy? What did he look like?"

"I didn't pay any particular attention. Kind of thin and lanky looking. Neither one of them got out of the car."

I hung up and went back to Sergeant Peters. I rubbed my forehead. "I feel like hell today. Got the flu bug or something."

He looked me over without too much interest. "You don't look sick."

"But I feel that way. I need a bed and aspirins." I left him for the captain's office and tried to look sicker while I talked the captain into letting me have the day off.

It was raining when I sprinted across the parking lot to my car. I was soaked by the time I unlocked it and got in.

River Falls. I tried to remember what Mike had told me about his trips up there before.

How did I know that Mike got to River Falls at all?

I began sweating.

Wouldn't it be simpler for Ryker just to kill him and dump the body outside of town?

I didn't want to believe that.

No. Not if Ryker wanted to find his wife too and he thought Mike knew where she was. He'd have to get that information out of Mike and Mike would remain alive just as long

as Ryker thought he had that information.

Where would he take Mike?

What better place than north? Where it is quiet. Where they could be alone.

I turned the ignition key and pulled out of the lot.

Fifteen minutes later I was on the inter-state, heading north.

Sudden gusts of wind almost took the car off the road and I had to play the wheel with a firm hand.

My cigarettes were brown with damp and the collar of my wet suit began to chafe my neck.

The miles dragged on and the weather got no better.

Two hours later, I was finishing my last straw-tasting cigarette when I saw the turn-off for Jefferson City and the sign, *Gas, Food, Lodging. Next Turn Right.*

Jefferson City?

Hadn't Mike mentioned this place? Didn't he say that he usually stopped here for a sandwich and coffee? The halfway break?

I slowed to ramp speed and took the right turn. Under the inter-state I found a gas station and a diner.

I parked the car and waited for a break in the rain, but there wasn't any sign of a let-up. Finally I made a dash for the diner.

Inside, I stayed on the rubber mat and let the water drain off my clothes.

The place was empty of customers and the counter-man was reading a newspaper.

He looked my way. "Looks like we're camped under a waterfall."

I nodded and told him who I was looking for.

He shook his head. "The name doesn't ring any bell. But then I don't know the names of even ten percent of the regular customers. This is a business of faces, hellos and goodbyes."

"He was going north to River Falls," I said. "Probably wearing an orange jacket. And I think his cap was orange too."

That stirred his memory. "Orange? Yeah. There was an orange in here last night. I remember noticing because almost everybody around here still sticks with red." He thought about it. "And he fit your description. A little on the heavy side and a cigar smoker."

"Was he alone?"

He rubbed his jaw. "It's coming back now. No. He was with a kind of tall man. They ordered a couple bags of take-out hamburgers."

I sloshed back to the car.

So Mike had made it this far.

I got the windshield wipers working and followed the ramp back up to the interstate.

The wind pulled at the car again and I found that fifty was the most I could do if I wanted to stay on the road. On valleys in the highway I had to do even less as the car wallowed through inches of water.

The miles dragged on with the rain stopped for five minutes, ten minutes, and then rushing down

again in vicious, heavy sheets making travel slow.

When I finally reached the River Falls turn-off, it was after two in the afternoon.

I put in another five miles on a narrow two-lane country road before I came to the road sign, *River Falls, pop. 257*.

The rain diminished to a drizzle as I slowed the car to a crawl and peered at the first motel on the right hand side of the road. No. Mike's car wasn't among those parked there.

I put pressure on the accelerator and drifted to the next motel. Not here either.

At the fourth motel, I saw it.

Mike's sedan.

I turned into the driveway and parked near the bar-restaurant at one end of the semi-circle of the motel units.

I got out of my car, my legs stiff with cold and wet. Mike's car was parked in front of unit number nine.

I took my .38 out of its holster, turned the door knob slowly and carefully, and stepped inside. The room was empty.

I moved to the bathroom. No one in there either. I stepped back outside of the unit.

River Falls was located in a shallow valley surrounded by wooded hills.

My eyes found an obvious path leading away from the motel. Here and there it disappeared into the trees, but I could still trace it winding up the nearest hill.



I caught my breath. That spot of orange near the top of the hill. The orange moved.

There were two figures up there. I could just make that out now. They were near the top and still moving up.

I jogged down the muddy trail. After a bit it began to rise into the side of the hill and I had to slow to a walk. Patches of water here and there made the going even rougher.

My dress shoes gave almost no grip on the slanting path. I slipped, fell, and slid down the slope, grasping at the bushes and eventually coming to a stop in a muddy gully.

I remained there half a minute, regaining my breath. Then I wiped the mud off my face with a sleeve and fought my way back up to the path.

I looked up the side of the hill again. For a moment I saw nothing in the drizzle and then I caught another glimpse of them before they disappeared into the trees.

I dabbed a wet handkerchief at the gash of my face and moved forward again. After five minutes of effort, I was gasping for breath. And then I heard it.

A shot.

My eyes went to the summit of the hill. I could make out one figure now. Just one. I saw no orange.

It was over. I took a deep breath. I could go up after him. Or could I wait right here for him to come down.

But suppose he went over the ridge and tried to get away by that route? I took another tired breath. This was business for the state cops now.

I turned and made my way slowly back to the motel.

Inside the barroom, the half a dozen customers turned and stared at me. The bartender's eyes widened too and I thought I detected fear. From the doorway to the room just beyond the bar, I could hear the click of pool balls.

I made my way to the public phone booth and pulled the door shut after me. I wiped the mud off my fingers with the wet handkerchief and found a dime in my sodden pants pockets.

I hesitated. State Police Headquarters? The county sheriff? No. I'd better dial headquarters in

Milwaukee first and let the department know what had happened.

I made the long distance call and got Captain Harrison. He was suprised to hear my voice. "I thought you were in bed sick? Where are you calling from?"

The outside door to the barroom opened. Two State Troopers strode in and approached the bar. The bartender leaned forward, talking to them, and then pointed in my direction.

The troopers pulled the pistols from their holsters and cautiously approached the booth.

I spoke into the mouthpiece. "Captain, Ryker just—"

One of the troopers motioned for me to come out of the booth.

Captain Harrison's voice came from the ear piece. "Ryker? Did you hear about it? It's all wrapped-up."

"Wrapped up?"

"Right," Harrison said. "Ryker took the seven o'clock train back to Madison last night."

"What?"

"Sure," he said. "The Madison police filled us in. It seems that last night Ryker made a phone call back to his mother in Madison and discovered that his wife had changed her mind and decided to return. He hopped the first train he could get back to Madison."

The receiver was damp in my hand. "What about the other man?"

"The other man was her brother. She stayed at his house in Milwaukee thinking things over and decided to

come back and give the marriage another try."

One of the troopers pulled open the phone booth door. "All right, mister. Come out of there with your hands up!"

I could still hear Captain Harrison's voice. "What the hell's going on at your end of the line?"

I hung up the receiver and stepped out the booth with my hands up.

Behind the troopers, the bartender spoke. "I saw him park outside and pull out this gun. He went into number nine and then back out again and up the side of the hill. I don't figure it. He looks nuts to me."

The front door opened again and a red-jacketed hunter looked in. "The O'Leary brothers just got themselves a buck up the side of the hill not more than ten minutes ago."

But the barroom wasn't particularly interested in his information. All eyes remained on me.

The click of the pool balls in the next room stopped and Mike

appeared in the doorway, a pool cue in his hand. He was alive and well. And dry and warm. He always had been.

And there beside him stood one of his neighbors, Joe Wyker. Hell, I'd even played cards with him once. Wyker, Ryker. Ryker, Wyker.

Damn.

Mike's mouth dropped. "Bill, what the hell are you doing up here? You look like you been sleeping in a muddy ditch for the last week or so."

And Mike was even wearing carpet slippers.

I closed my eyes.

It was just too much. Everything was closing in on me. There was too much to explain. But they were all waiting.

I would have to tell them something. Someday. But until then—

I opened my eyes and gazed around vacantly.

"Where am I?" I asked plaintively. "What's my name? Who am I?"

In the Next Issue:

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

LUCKY LUCIANO

THE MURDEROUS GANGSTER

by DAVID MAZROFF



Two For One

by

EDWARD Y. BREESE

The arm of Murder reaches deep and far in the night. But the arm of Justice reaches farther.

ROGER'S FATHER had said years ago, "Murder is like a boomerang. It comes back to destroy the hand that set it in motion."

Ward Rogers had to laugh when he thought of it. For all his business acumen and the ferocious competitive drive which had amassed his millions, his old man had been naive in many ways. You couldn't say, "Murder is...." any more than, "A murderer is....". Murders and murderers alike were individual. One

man's poison, so to speak, was meat for another.

Rogers wasn't afraid of any backlash from this particular murder. Since his father's heart attack he was the biggest man in the State. The mines and mills were his. The railroads ran at his signal. The governor called him Mister and the mayor held his coat at public functions.

A man that big doesn't get convicted of murder. He doesn't even

get tried for it. No matter how guilty he may be, he's just too big to touch. Ordinary men respect this fact and get out of his way. Rogers took the big blue steel forty-five automatic out of the desk drawer, where he'd put it when he gave it to her for "Protection". In two years it hadn't even been moved. He wondered, as he pulled the slide to chamber a shell, if she'd really noticed it in all that time. When he'd given her the gun he'd genuinely wanted her protected. He laughed.

"What are you doing?" she said. "Don't just turn away from me, Ward. I won't have it any more. We've got to settle things, like I told you. We've got to settle them now."

"Yes, dear," Rogers said. He turned and walked towards her down the length of the over-warm, over-furnished, expensive apartment living room.

She sat on the white satin upholstery of the couch in her five hundred dollar pastel dressing gown that had slipped off the breasts, and watched him come. Her lips were petulant, but her eyes were hard.

"Yes, dear," Rogers said. "I mean to settle everything right now."

He held the gun within two feet of her heart and pulled the trigger. He thought she hadn't even noticed that he held it.

The heavy, metal jacketed slug went right through her body and into the couch. The impact was horrible. Her body arched and slammed back against the cushions. Shock and

nerve reaction skinned back her lips and popped the hard eyes.

"One for the road, my dear," Rogers said, and shot her again in almost the same spot. He knew the second shot wasn't needed, but somehow the act loosed the terrible tensions of hate and frustration within him.

He no longer really knew how or why he had first come to love this woman. The sheer animal passion she could generate in him and in herself had been responsible, he guessed. Now, ten years later, he knew better than ever again to yield to such strong emotion. He had been very young. Worse, he had been very stupid indeed. He'd even been stupid enough for a secret legal marriage across the State line.

That was why he had shot her this morning. He was no hotblooded boy any more. He was a man and ready to marry in his own financial and social class. But she wouldn't let him go. Insanely and incredibly, she'd refused the quiet, discreet foreign divorce he asked of her.

Rogers couldn't believe it at first. All these years, while he waited for his father to die, she'd been content to let him keep her like a mistress. She'd taken his money and gifts and traded her body in return, without ever asking public recognition as his wife.

I suppose, he thought, she knew that Father would break her and throw her out, if he knew we were really married. Now she felt she

could handle me, keep me married, take her public position, and have the use of all my money.

"Oh, no," he said to the broken, bloody corpse on the couch. "You wouldn't be reasonable. But you forgot. You forgot that I'm my father's son."

He went quietly and methodically about the process of wiping his own fingerprints off the gun and placing it in her limp right hand. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the police headquarters number. When the desk sergeant answered, Rogers made his voice sound flat and shocked.

When he first decided to kill her he had carefully outlined more than one classically perfect plan for murder. For months it had provided fuel for wish dreams and a delightful mental exercise. He'd never really taken any of those plans seriously. He knew they weren't necessary at all.

A man in his position, Rogers knew perfectly well, had no real need to conceal murder. Because of his wealth and the power of that wealth, no one in authority would want to convict him. Even from a cell he could break any politician or civil servant in the state. If he wanted revenge, he could smash hostile judges, State's attorneys or jurymen like eggshells. He knew it and they knew it.

Instead of wanting to convict him, they would only be looking for an excuse to let him go. All Ward

Rogers really had to do was to supply them with that excuse.

When the police arrived they were led by Captain Jonas Berk, who headed the Homicide Division. The chief didn't come in person only because the papers would have played that up. There were two lieutenants, half a dozen detective sergeants, the corner's first assistant in person, and every local police-beat reporter from the papers and TV stations.

Rogers didn't have to pretend to be shaking when he let them in. It was excitement and tension that did it, not grief.

"It was terrible," he said, "terrible. I couldn't stop her. She was too quick for me."

He gave them a half hour worthy of Shakespeare at his best. On the surface he was quite frank and open with them. He told them the woman had been his wife. They knew her as his mistress, of course. He admitted he had driven her to suicide.

"I wanted a divorce," he said. "We had been talking of it for weeks. She refused. I thought it was only money she wanted, and I made her a most generous offer. I never dreamed how strongly she felt. Believe me I never dreamed." There was just enough truth in that statement to give his voice a ring of sincerity.

"She had the gun under one of those couch pillows," Rogers said. "Usually it's kept in her desk. She must have planned what she would do. When she saw I meant it about

the divorce, she snatched it up and shot herself. Just like that.

"Just like that," one of the lieutenants echoed. The corner's man got up from leaning over the body and pulled Captain Berk aside. The newspaper photographer's cameras clicked, but Rogers knew he could get their editors to kill those pictures.

He wasn't worried about a thing. He'd given them the excuse they needed to let him off the hook. He hadn't tried to hide the details of an involved plot. They might blame him for the suicide, but it's not illegal to ask for a divorce.

Of course, if he'd been anyone else, they might have suspected his story. He might have been grilled. But he was Ward Rogers. That solved many problems.

He didn't believe it when Captain Berk came over to where he was standing.

"I'm sorry, sir," the captain said, "but you'll have to come down to Headquarters with us. I have to arrest you for murder."

"That's impossible, Captain," Rogers said, shocked. "It was suicide. I saw her do it."

"I'm sorry, sir," the captain said again.

"But Captain," Rogers tried again. "I saw it. I was alone with her in the apartment. Who could possible accuse me of—"

Captain Berk shook his head. "You accused yourself, Mr. Rogers. What you just said only makes it worse. You accused yourself and convicted yourself before you called us."

"I don't understand."

"Nobody," the Captain said, "can shoot himself twice in the heart with a .45 caliber gun. The shock of impact would paralyze, even if the first shot wasn't fatal. There's no way anyone could ignore that fact, Mr. Rogers. There's no way at all."

There had to be a way, Rogers thought. He hadn't been told about his rights. His lawyers... He'd have that fellow from Texas and the other one from California. The judge would be afraid of him, even in a cell. There had to be a way.

"Let's go," Captain Berk said. "Let's go down town and get it over with."

Nobody was even watching the body on the couch.

Next Month

BY HIS OWN HAND — A NEW MR. MEI WONG STORY

By DAN ROSS

*She was rich, beautiful—and hated by all and
sundry. Who had pushed her to her doom?
Only Fate—and a shoe—knew the answer . . .*

SOMEDAY THEY'LL KILL HER

by MAX VAN DERVEER

THE NEW YEAR'S EVE party swirled around me. Stereophonic music. Inane chatter. Ice tinkling against glass. Shrimp and crab tasties.

It was not my kind of party. Too many people. Too much money represented. None of these people came off 134th Street. They lived across the river, up on The Knobs.

At headquarters, their district technically was termed the 91st Precinct. In squadroom language, it was The Goddamn Knobs. Cops did not like to work The Goddamn Knobs; cops preferred 134th Street. On 134th you got close to the people, talked their language—and they put out beer and cheese for a guy.

So what was I doing at Eunice Georgia's New Year's Eve party in a downtown, luxuriant, two-bedroom hotel suite—me, a cop detective sergeant? I was there because Eunice had insisted.

"You are my friend, Copper," she had said over the telephone line. It

had been five years since I had heard that heart-stirring voice. "Perhaps the single real friend I have in the world. And I want to see you again. So please come to my party. Please? I'll only be in town a few days."

I met Eunice at Indiana University. Poor boy. Rich girl. We dated. No more. No love. We just seemed to be two people attracted to each other. It was a good, clean relationship. But it was to end, too, naturally. We sensed it, and we accepted it. The end came, of course, with graduation. I went off to become a bachelor cop while Eunice went off to her world travels. But now, this New Year's Eve, we were together again—or, at least, at the same party. . .

"Hey, where's Eunice?" a falsetto voice squawked. "Damn, where's our hostess?"

"I saw her a moment ago, Harry. She was over there in a corner, talking to that new friend of hers, that Canadian fellow."

"It's near midnight. I want to kiss



our beautiful hostess. Where did she go?"

He was the party stereotype: the peppery, pot-bellied, loud oaf who sometimes—days later—is referred to as "the life of the party."

"Harry, you're drunk!"

"Beautifully. Hey! Anybody! Where's Eunice?"

"Went out on the balcony," a new voice said. "Saw her myself."

"With that Canadian?" Harry couldn't seem to believe. "Damn! What's his name?"

"Toliver."

"Yeah, Toliver. Eunice went out on the balcony with Toliver, huh? What's he think he is? God's gift?"

"He could be to me," giggled a fat woman who was pink and intoxicated.

"Well, the hell with Toliver! I'm going to kiss Eunice at midnight!"

"Harry, you are drunk."

"Harry, she went out there *alone*. Saw her myself. . ."

"Harry, you're going to get sliced into pieces. Nobody—I mean nobody, man—kisses Eunice unless Eunice wants to be kissed."

"Harry?"

It was a new pleading voice. It belonged to a very thin woman with a flat chest and no rump. I watched her take Harry's arm. Her lips were pinched. Her fingers dug into the arm.

"I'd like to be kissed at midnight, Harry," she said.

He put her off with a snap of his shoulders. "Hell, Madge, you're my wife! I can kiss you any time!"

The shrill scream tore it. It came from outside the closed french doors, and it tapered off fast.

Everyone in the room seemed suddenly to be statues. Even Harry. With his puffy lower jaw hanging and his fat brow furrowed. Then he muttered, "What the hell—"

I left my wall and moved quickly through the crowd. I had been trained, of course, not to induce excitement, but speed seemed essential too. I wanted to be at the french doors before the crush.

They piled out onto the balcony behind me and they draped themselves over the parapet, babbling.

Fourteen decks below was the cold street. The street contained people, their numbers swelling rapidly. And the people encircled. *What* they encircled I could not see. Yet I knew. Down there Eunice Georgia was sprawled, smashed against concrete.

She was face down, shoeless, bloody and lifeless when I got to the street. In the distance, a siren moaned. . .

LIEUTENANT DECHAMP put his feet against the edge of his desk and pushed back in the swivel chair. A habit. He touched the rim of his glasses. Another habit. He sniffed. Habit. Finally he said, "Why are you insisting she was pushed, Copper?"

"Because I knew her, Dan. She had no reason to jump."

"But the last time you had any contact with her was five years ago."

"She didn't jump. She was pushed or pitched or—"

"Fell accidentally. Slipped and fell."

"There was no ice on the balcony. No snow. The balcony was clean. I want this one, Dan. You can't give it to someone else."

"Weren't you emotionally involved with the girl?"

"No."

"You didn't even know her, huh?"

"Sarcasm I don't need."

"But a good, level-headed cop I do need. One who can see, hear and ask objectively, without personal

feeling. Do you honestly think you qualify?"

Outside the police building New Year's morning was brilliant and brittle. The window sparkled. I could be objective. I already was being objective. I was looking the death of Eunice Georgia straight in its crummy eye. I knew she was not a suicide. I knew the fall had not been an accident. She had been murdered. I felt it in my bones.

"The fact that I knew the girl could help," I pressed. "I know her background. I know her habits. I may need to brush up a bit here and there, but—"

"You hadn't seen the girl in five years. She could have changed."

"I saw her last night, Dan. She was the same Eunice."

"A girl who didn't like to wear shoes." He fingered the rim of his glasses.

"Wrong. Eunice was not the kind to take off her shoes at a party. She would consider such an act ill-mannered."

"So where are her shoes?"

"I don't know. Maybe somebody in the street crowd—"

But I let that one hang.

"The thought doesn't appeal to you?"

"How can people do it, Dan?"

"Steal shoes from a dead girl? Hell, Copper, why do people loot a riot-wrecked store?"

"Her stockings were tattered. The skin had been peeled from the back of her heels. The lab boys said—"

"She could have landed on her back. Bounced. Flipped."

"Or she could have been sitting on the balcony wall. It's twelve inches wide. Exactly a foot. I measured it last night. She could have been sitting with her back to the city. Someone pushed her. Her heels scraped against the wall. The scraping tore the shoes from her feet."

In my mind's eye I saw the murder: Eunice, unaware, beautiful, smiling slightly, perched perkily on the balcony wall. The killer stood facing her. The killer's chatter was inconsequential, designed to keep Eunice off guard. Then suddenly the killer stiff-armed the beautiful girl and she plunged...

"Then you should have found the girl's shoes on the balcony. Right?"

"The killer snatched them up and ran into the bedroom. Don't forget the bedroom, Dan. It also has french doors opening onto the balcony."

"I know how you've got it figured," he nodded, sniffing. "Eunice Georgia walked out onto the balcony alone. A potential killer saw her leave the party, slid through the bedroom, flipped her over the wall, then slid back through the bedroom and into the party again."

"Not quite," I said. "I think the killer was waiting for Eunice. I think he or she already was in the bedroom. I think he or she was stretched out on the bed, watching the balcony, waiting for Eunice to appear alone. I think the killer knew Eunice



was a fresh air fiend, no matter the temperature, knew that sooner or later during the evening she would quietly leave the crowd and step onto the balcony."

"The killer was alone in a dark room, stretched out on a bed and just waiting, huh? Copper, what if someone had entered that bedroom, even by mistake?"

"No sweat. The killer could fake illness. Or pretend to be drunk."

He considered, then he said, "Look, the girl was crooked. She suddenly needed air. She went onto the balcony, sat on the wall. Then she jumped or fell."

"Eunice didn't drink."

"Five years ago."

"Last night. Eunice didn't like the taste of booze. She was just a non-drinker who liked to throw a bash."

"Eunice liked people?"

"Yes."

"And people liked her?"

"Well...no."

"She likes people, but people don't like her? She lays out a party, and people come to her party—but *people don't like her?*"

"She was a stand-off girl, Dan. No one ever got close to her."

"Not even you?"

"I was as close as anyone."

"How about this Agatha Johnson?"

"I don't know about her."

"They took the hotel suite together. They shared a ship state room, coming from Europe. And—according to Agatha Johnson—they traveled Europe together for the last three months. That's not being close?"

"Yeah, that's being close, I guess."

"Or take this Canadian, this Toliver Evans. Agatha Johnson and Eunice Georgia knew him in Europe. And he was at the party here."

"So?"

"Then there is the author, Brian Medill."

"The drunk."

"But still the hottest author in the business today."

"Okay."

"He was at the party."

Dan made sense, and I knew it. Yet I could not accept it. The aloof-

ness in Eunice had been inborn; it was a part of her makeup. It was one of the things that had made Eunice Georgia different from any other person. She never had allowed people to get close to her. And yet I now had to accept the fact that, on the surface, at least, this trio—Agatha Johnson, Toliver Evans, and Brian Medill—apparently had become intimate friends of Eunice Georgia. Why? Had she been using them? Were they using her? Or had a barrier inside Eunice truly been broken down?

"Medill, by his own admission, is—was—in love with your Eunice Georgia, Copper."

"He says."

Dan shrugged slightly. "And I say we have at least three people who *were* on an intimate basis with the girl."

"Yeah, maybe. But I'm talking about people in general. People, in general, didn't like Eunice. She was too cold. She never really got close to anyone, never let anyone get close to her. Understand?"

"Not really."

"Someone pushed her, Dan."

"You got a candidate?"

"One of three. Agatha Johnson, Evans, or Medill."

"Wow! You pick dandies!"

"The only three who were not in the main room when Eunice went out onto the balcony. There were ten couples, Agatha Johnson, Evans, Medill and myself at the party. The ten couples were in the main room. I

remember most of them being there. The presence of the others has already been vouched for. The three who were not present were Agatha Johnson, Evans and Medill. Agatha said she was resting in her bedroom."

"Which does not front on the balcony."

"Toliver Evans said he was in the bath."

"Which doesn't front on the balcony."

"Brian Medill said he was walking the corridors of the hotel. He was nervous, he was restless, he was drunk, he was—"

"The corridors do not front on that particular balcony."

"But the point is, Dan, one is lying!"

"You say."

"We still have to investigate."

"Yes," he said slowly, thoughtfully.

"Well?"

"All right. But be damn sure you are right in every move!"

AGATHA JOHNSON was not receptive to my presence at the door of the hotel suite that cold New Year's morning. The previous night she had been polished, buxom, blue-rinsed and poised. This morning she lacked luster, she sagged, the blue rinse needed bluing, and she was nervous.

Detective Sergeant Oliver Mason, I told her anyway.

Yeah, she remembered. Eunice's cop pal. What did I want?

To enter.

She didn't have to let me inside.

That's right. She didn't. But it might be best if she did.

Was I threatening her?

Never let it be said a cop threatened anyone. Especially a lady.

I could can that bushwah too. But, okay, come on in if I had to be a nuisance. Seems the police would let a woman grieve alone. Especially on the morning after.

Grieve? Was she nursing a hang-over or the death of her friend Eunice?

Cops. All smart twerps. Did I want a tequila for breakfast? She was having tequila. It was the only thing she ever drank. All that other rotgut ruined a person's stomach.

I didn't want a tequila? Okay, so it further confirmed an opinion. Cops were too dedicated. Cops didn't know how to live.

You've met other cops?

Hundreds, honey. All over the world. Eunice called you Copper.

That's right. It's my red hair, and it's better than Brick, isn't it? I mean, I could have been called Brick Mason.

Oh my God, a humorous cop!

Police detective. And not particularly funny. More, a public servant.

Ahh. Was she not public?

Oh, sure, you're public, all right, Mrs. Johnson.

I'm *rich* public, Mr. Mason.

Sorry. That didn't frighten me.

Very rich. She'd had seven husbands.

Admirable, perhaps.

Three were twerps. They had run out on her. But four had been nice men. They had died.

Leaving her means, naturally.

If I could term a shipyard, a shoe chain, twenty-three television and radio stations and fifty-five thousand acres of Texas ranch land with cattle means, then she had means.

So how comes I was bugging her so early in the morning?

I didn't think Eunice had jumped or fallen from the balcony.

I thought somebody tossed her?

Pushed was more probable.

Oh Lord! You're wild, honey!

Merely considering a possibility.

And that's why you are here? You think I might have pushed? Oh Lord!

Did you?

No.

You were in your bedroom when she died.

I didn't ever hear her scream. I was asleep. It was a boring party.

Then how do you know she screamed?

Someone told me later. Look, Buster, the world isn't exactly stuffed with Eunice Georgia fans.

I knew.

So get off my back. I was one of her few pals.

And just how had they become pals?

Simple. They'd met in Rome. Each was a traveler. Each was American. Each was free. Their interests coincided.

Interests?

Men. Fun. Parties. And Mrs. Johnston had money while Eunice had youth and beauty.

Hold it one sec. Eunice also had money.

Not recently, doll. Eunice had blown her wad.

Eunice was broke?

Not broke. But she wasn't sure where her next trip was coming from either.

Last night's party—the cop was under the impression it had been Eunice's party.

So the cop had a wrong impression.

Then it was Mrs. Johnson's party.

For Eunice. Eunice had wanted a party, so Mrs. Johnson had opened her purse strings. Mrs. Johnson had green. Eunice had looks.

Hmm. That was the basis of a friendship? Eunice attracted, Mrs. Johnson paid?

Pretty good combination, right?

Perhaps. Unless jealousy came along to spoil things.

Well, there might have been a little.

On whose part?

Mrs. Johnson's natch.

How come?

Man, when did Eunice Georgia ever not get the top prize?

I was pretty certain it was a rare occasion.

Well...sometimes Mrs. Johnson wanted the top prize.

Like currently?

Well, yes, maybe.



And the top prize was?

Toliver Evans.

He was at the party.

Yep.

He was the Canadian.

Yep—maybe.

Maybe?

Agatha and Eunice had met him in Switzerland.

Did that make him a non-Canadian?

No. But it didn't make him a Swiss climber either.

Okay, Mrs. Johnson. How come you figure all is not kosher with Toliver Evans?

Did she say it wasn't? Toliver was handsome, young, athletic, debonair.

But had gone for Eunice.

Well, yes.

And paid his own way.

Uh—not exactly.

Mrs. Johnston had paid?

Now that was being exact!

Then Evans was a gigolo.

Totally.

When had Eunice and Agatha met

handsome, athletic, debonair Toliver Evans?

Couple of months before.

And Agatha thought he was snazzy?

Very snazzy.

But he went for Eunice.

What male didn't?

So Agatha had become tired of shelling out and not getting the end result.

I was a brilliant cop.

So maybe she had pushed Eunice from the balcony wall.

Naw. All's fair in love etc., that jazz.

Okay, so maybe Evans had pushed Eunice.

My God, why would he? With Eunice, he had everything he wanted.

Except the continuance of assured income from Mrs. Johnson.

Well, yes. There was that.

So perhaps the lure of money was greater than the lure of beauty.

Perhaps. But he didn't have to *push*. All he had to do was *turn*.

And now?

If he turned she'd open her arms wide.

Even though Evans was a parasite?

A gigolo, Mr. Mason.

How old is he?

Twenty-three, twenty-five, twenty-eight. Take your pick.

Is he a Canadian?

He says he is.

Does he travel on a Canadian passport?

He says he does.

Did he return to the United States with Mrs. Johnson and Eunice?

He had not. He had popped in the previous afternoon. Surprise. He had come down from Montreal.

He gets around, huh?

Obviously.

He was staying in the hotel?

Suite. Couple of floors down.

And would Mrs. Johnson be picking up the tab for that suite too?

Probably.

Did Mrs. Johnson want to phone Evans, tell him a cop was coming down to see him later?

She could do it after the cop had departed.

Maybe Evans would take a powder.

Maybe.

She didn't care?

She knew where to catch up with him. There were perhaps eight or ten ports in the world he might kite out to.

So perhaps Mrs. Johnson should not phone.

Another threat, Mr. Mason?

I want to talk to Evans. Period.

So go talk. At least, he would be clear-headed.

No hangover, she meant?

Not Toliver. Toliver did not drink. It was one of the things he and Eunice had had in common.

Okay. Let's talk about Brian Medill.

Why?

He also was at Eunice's—your party last night.

So? Look, I hate to admit it, but

you're moving too fast for me. One instant we are discussing Toliver Evans and the next—

Brian Medill was in love with Eunice.

He professed. But, please, would I remember that Brian Medill also was a lush. He drank from sleep to sleep so it might behoove one to weigh Brian Medill's declarations with care. Brian Medill might not be totally accountable for all—

Mrs. Johnson did not like Brian Medill?

Mrs. Johnson thought Brian Medill to be a complete ass.

But a successful author.

Oh yes. Very successful.

And rich.

Shrug. Rich one day, poor the next. The cop knew authors

The cop did not. But had Eunice been in love with the rich-poor author?

Was the cop kidding?

The cop was not.

Eunice Georgia did not allow herself to fall in love.

But Medill still was on the make for her?

Insistently.

Frustrating?

Very, Mrs. Johnson imagined.

Where had they met, Eunice and Medill?

Mrs. Johnson thought it had been on the French Riviera. Long before her time. And couldn't we knock this off now? The tequila wasn't helping. Her hangover was a bitch.

We could not knock it off. The

cop wanted Mrs. Johnson's impression of Brian Medill.

Lush. Coward. That was a total impression.

Coward?

He walked corridors.

Please?

Fire. The previous night. The suite was on the 14th floor. Brian Medill walked corridors, looking for outs in case of fire. What did that tell the cop about the man?

It told the cop Brian Medill had a thing about being trapped in a fire.

Brian Medill had a thing about being trapped anywhere. By anybody. And by anything.

Then it might be doubtful he would venture onto a high balcony.

Oh, it would be very doubtful. Invisible hands could pitch him over the wall of the balcony.

"Mrs. Johnson, will you answer one question honestly for me?"

"Sure, Junior. Shoot."

"Why aren't you upset by Eunice's death?"

"Oh, but I am! As soon as I get rid of this monstrous hangover, I'll cry!"

TOLIVER EVANS did not open his door when I rapped. Had he received the phone call, I wondered. Was he now running? And if he was running, why was he running? I went down to the hotel lobby, stopped at the desk, made inquiries. Mr. Toliver Evans had checked out of the hotel early that morning.

I drove across the river and up on

The Goddamn Knobs. Brian Medill owned a plush stone and glass house on the apex of one of the hills. That much I'd checked out before leaving headquarters.

I turned into a concrete, U-shaped driveway, braked in front of a pillared porch, but did not get an answer when I put a thumb against the button of the door chimes. I sucked cold air, felt frustrated, and returned to the official sedan. Leaving the Medill grounds, I paid particular attention to a dark green sedan that had pulled into a driveway ahead of me. I didn't slow, but I inventoried the sedan as I passed it.

The sedan was familiar. It was occupied by a lone driver. Male. He had a sharp profile. He did not look at me. I kept the official sedan moving along at thirty mile per hour clip. The green car trailed. Was it the same green car that had followed me from the hotel out to Brian Medill's house? I decided that it was.

At headquarters, I braked in the official parking lot and went into the police building. I looked back. The driver had vacated the green car, was coming up the steps of the building. He was a medium-statured man in a deep blue hat and coat. He looked efficient and sure of himself. I went on up to the third floor detective squadroom. The man came after me.

He stopped at the railing that separated the entrance area from the working area and I knew that with one glance he had taken in and cased the squadroom.

"Yes?" I said politely.

He was careful. He almost allowed a grin. "I've been following you. It seems I am in error." He allowed the grin to form then. "My name," he said, "is Ralph Dark." He produced Federal Bureau of Investigation identification. "We have Toliver Evans whose real name is Seymour W. Vann. Private. United States Army. A deserter."

I took Dark into Lieutenant DeChamp's office.

Evans, or Vann, had deserted the Army six months before. He had asked and received asylum in Sweden. Then he had left Sweden and disappeared for a few weeks. Dark was not explicit about how the FBI and others had picked up his trail, but they knew Vann had obtained a fraudulent Canadian passport in Lisbon. They knew he had taken a plane to Montreal, then entered the United States.

"We finally caught up with him early this morning at the hotel," Dark said.

"And me?" I said.

Vann and a friend had deserted together. Vann's friend also had disappeared from Sweden but the FBI had lost him. There always was the chance the friend might appear wherever Vann was.

"We would like to interrogate Vann," Lieutenant DeChamp said, fingering his glasses.

Dark frowned, asked to make a phone call, made it, then said, "This afternoon, Lieutenant. But it seems

we and the Army have first priority."

"Dan," I said, "maybe Eunice Georgia knew Toliver Evans—Seymour Vann—was a deserter."

He sniffed.

"Maybe she threatened to expose him for some reason."

"And he pushed?"

"Why not?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "why not?" He looked straight at Dark. "We need him, Dark."

Dark shrugged. "This afternoon."

"He could be a murderer."

"I understand your position,"

Dark said. And then he departed.

"Well how about that?"

Dan scowled, put his feet against his desk. "I don't like it."

"But what can we do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Evans probably is our boy, and we can't have him?"

"That may damn well be. How did you make out with Agatha Johnson, Brian Medill?"

I gave him the rundown.

"What about this Agatha?" he probed. "Could she have killed?"

"She might have had reason. She had opportunity."

"But this Vann could have had a better reason. Is that what you're thinking?"

"Yeah."

"Also along with opportunity."

"If you don't want to believe that washing his hands bit."

"At the moment, I'll take him," Dan said flatly.

"On the other hand, there's still



this fellow by the name of Medill."

Dan gave me a sharp look. "Everybody gets his day in court, huh?"

"Remember, he told us last night he was walking corridors. Agatha Johnson has more or less substantiated same. But there again, opportunity."

"Motive? He supposedly was in love with the girl."

"I have to talk to him, Dan."

"It bugs you, doesn't it, that there might truly have been something between your Eunice and Brian Medill?"

"I just can't accept it," I admitted. "I know—knew Eunice."

More lab reports had come up from downstairs. And still nothing pointed to murder. No official ruling had been made, but it was becoming increasingly clear that ruling was to be death by accident or death by suicide.

I took the entire Eunice Georgia

file, went off into a corner, pondered the sheet after sheet of papers. When the medical gibberish was translated it boiled down to Eunice having been totally scrambled by the abrupt end to her plunge. Every major bone in her body had been fractured and the guy who had written the report hadn't even bothered to go into detail about the minor bones. Her brain had been squished and her organs had been dislodged. She was a mass of abrasions and lacerations. Her upper front teeth had been found lodged in her throat. Even her fingernails had been split. And no foreign matter—skin scraped from another body, hair or fiber—had been found under those nails.

Naturally her clothing had been soiled. The outer garment, a white cocktail dress, was a mess. Ordinary street filth, water and bourbon stains had taken their toll. The victim had worn conventional underclothing, from an expensive shop. The lone discrepancy in attire was the absence of shoes; the victim had not been wearing shoes when her body had been given to the lab technicians.

The good condition of stomach, lungs, liver, kidneys, heart, etc. etc. pointed to a general abstention from alcohol, drug and tobacco by the deceased. Content of body fluids substantiated this finding. Conclusion: the victim had not been under the influence of drink or narcotic at the time of death. Second conclusion: the victim died instantly upon contact with the sidewalk.

One inconsistency troubled me. The lab report had said bourbon stains had been found on Eunice's dress. But she had been a non-drinker. Someone at the party could have spilled a drink on her, true, but there again the inconsistency reared its head. Eunice had been a tidy person. A spilled drink on a dress would have meant an instant change of dress.

I decided against phoning Medill. I needed fresh air. And if I didn't get an answer to my ring at his house this time, I was going to enter anyway. Because I wanted to know if *he* might be running.

I'd stewed for nothing. He was home; he opened his door. He was attired in pajamas, robe and slippers. He looked beat, he accepted my presence—he'd been expecting someone from the police—and he offered me a drink. I declined. He poured bourbon on ice cubes, sipped and shuddered. Then he faced me. His attitude was as if he was facing certain death and he had steeled himself. It was not the attitude of coward, I thought.

"All right," he said abruptly, "ask your questions, Sergeant. I fully understand that last night's interrogation was purely preliminary."

I said I thought Eunice had been murdered.

It didn't seem to rock him. He remained poker faced, swirling the bourbon and ice cubes in his glass. He took a few seconds to digest and then he nodded.

"Very possible," he said.

"Why?"

The bluntness didn't toss him either, but he took time to light a filtered cigarette. He hacked, apologized. "Sorry. I'm afflicted with cancer of the throat." He drew smoke, hacked again, sipped bourbon. "Why do I think Eunice might have been pushed from her balcony? Because she had many enemies. You knew her, I understand. From your university days, I believe it was. And if you really knew Eunice, you know she had enemies.

"Eunice was a cruel person. She hurt. Oh, I don't mean she was deliberate, but she hurt."

"You, Mr. Medill?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, she hurt me. I was in love with her, you understand. We met on the Riviera in France three and one-half years ago. I have been in love with her since that meeting. It's why I now own this house. I bought it, hoping to lure Eunice into it. I actually bought it *for* her. She never once was inside the front door. It boils down to this, Sergeant: I loved Eunice Georgia, she made no effort to love me."

"She wasn't obligated."

"Certainly not," he admitted, "but it does seem she could have tried."

"Perhaps she was in love with Toliver Evans."

"No." He shook his head.

"Did you know Evans before last

night? Had you met him before the party?"

"Then how can you be sure she—"

"I asked her," he interrupted. He finished the bourbon in his glass, poured more, emptied a bottle, went behind the small, corner bar, brought out a new bottle. "She never had been in love with anyone, she said. And Eunice never lied, Sergeant. Perhaps that was one of her faults. A small lie here and there sometimes takes the cruelty out of fact."

"Evans is an Army deserter."

It did not seem to surprise him.

"Do you think Eunice might have known Evans was on the run?"

"I doubt it," he said.

"It could be motive for murder. She could have threatened—"

"Why would he tell her?"

It was an excellent question, of course. So I turned abruptly to Agatha Johnson. I recounted what I knew about her and her relationship with Eunice.

Medill kept nodding thoughtfully as I talked. Then, when I had finished, he surprised me. He said, "She is capable of murder."

"That needs explaining, Mr. Medill."

He lit a fresh cigarette, hacked. "Agatha Johnson is a greedy woman. When she wants, she gets."

"No matter the cost?"

"No matter."

"She'd kill to get Evans?"

He shrugged. "All I have given you is my opinion of the woman."

"How long have you known her?"

"I've been *aware* of her ever since she and Eunice met."

"She stymied you with Eunice?"

"An excellent choice of word, Sergeant."

"You're not exactly at the top of her roster of personal friends either, Mr. Medill."

"I should hope not."

"She terms you a lush."

"Appropriate." He lifted the glass in a jaunty salute, drank.

"And a coward."

He smiled. "I am a *careful* man, Sergeant. I watch out for Brian Medill. Perhaps this sense of care stems from cowardice, however—"

"You told us last night that you were not in the suite at the time of Eunice's death," I interrupted.

"I was prowling the corridors of the hotel, yes. Hotels bother me. I never feel comfortable inside one. I have an extremely closed-in feeling. I seek exits."

"If hotels are such a bug, how come you went to the party?"

"Now that's a rather asinine question, Sergeant. It was Eunice's party. She had just returned to the United States. I didn't know she was in the country, and then she called. I would have crawled into a complex of tunnels to be near her."

"Does being high frighten you, Mr. Medill?"

He frowned. "I fly."

"How about standing on high balconies? Say fourteen stories above a street?"

"No, that wouldn't bother me. There is space beyond most balconies."

"Were you on the hotel balcony with Eunice?"

"Finally." He sighed, smoked, hacked, drank. "Finally we reach the crux. Instead of prowling corridors as I said I was doing, was I on the balcony with Eunice? Did I push her from the balcony? Frustrated love. Is that how you have me pegged, Sergeant? I am a man caught up in the frustrations of a one-sided love. I can not have my love, so I destroy her."

"It's happened before, mister."

I was losing patience. He was becoming more jaunty. I struggled inwardly; I needed my cool. Medill was smart. He wouldn't bumble. If he had pushed Eunice, he had an out.

He smiled, finished the drink, smoked, hacked, then said, "Sergeant?" He seemed mildly amused now. "Do you really think I killed her? Is that why you are here? You have interrogated Agatha Johnson, you have found Toliver Evans to be something other than what he appeared to be, yet you—"

"You had motive and opportunity, too," I reminded him.

"Opportunity I might admit. Motive I will not."

"And there were bourbon stains on her dress."

He again looked mildly surprised. "But Eunice did not drink."

"I know. Point."

"Point?"

"A drink had to be spilled on her. And she would have changed dresses unless she did not have the opportunity. Unless someone with a drink in his hand pushed her and the drink spilled with the push. Toliver Evans is a non-drinker. Agatha Johnson drinks tequila."

"Then the murder suspects have been narrowed to the three of us?"

"In my mind, yes."

"You are so positive, Sergeant. Perhaps it was you who pushed her. You were at the party too. Perhaps you drink bourbon."

"I drink bourbon, all right, Medill, but—"

"You did not push her."

I lashed out. I shouted at him. "What did you do with her shoes? Did you keep them as a memento? If I tear this place apart, will I find them?"

He became deadly calm suddenly. He stood stiffly erect, stared hard at me. Then he seemed to ease a bit. He reached for the new bottle, opened it, poured. He offered the bottle.

"Perhaps we both should cool, Sergeant," he said flatly.

"Her shoes are missing," I went on doggedly.

He put the bottle on the bar, took his drink, cupped it, but his eyes did not leave mine.

"I don't understand this shoe business," he said.

"I think I'll get a search warrant," I said. "I think I'll *call in* for a search warrant. I think I want to keep you in my sight."

He drank. "Why?"

"The shoes."

He drank again.

"If I find her shoes in this house, Medill—"

I did not finish it. It was a threat.

"I wish I understood you," he said.

"*Do you have her shoes?*" I asked. "I remember them. White. Spiked heels. No backs. Strapless. Dainty. New. Just the kind of shoes Eunice should wear. Did you keep them?"

"Sergeant, I do believe you also were in love with Eunice Georgia."

He smirked. I headed for him and his bar. There was a phone on the bar. I jerked up the receiver. He shook his head; continued to smirk.

"Too late," he said.

I did not dial.

He lifted the empty glass. "Always the out, remember."

He had offered me the bottle. I didn't get it.

"The shoes," he said. "Eunice's shoes. Upstairs. In my bedroom. In a closet. There are many pairs. They all belonged to women at one time. Some I stole, some I asked for and received. It's a quirk with me, Sergeant. I like women's shoes. I like to sit and look at them and think about the women who wore them. Some men collect baubles, some men collect locks of hair, some men collect panties. I collect shoes."

He sobered suddenly and put the glass on the bar, stared at it. He was silent for several seconds, and then

his voice was husky: "All I asked for was her shoes, Sergeant. I'd resigned myself to such pittance. But she laughed at me. She thought I was being silly, and she actually struggled briefly with me when I put her on the balcony wall. I tore the shoes from her feet and—"

He looked up abruptly.

"Now I can not live with a memory, even if I am to live only a short time." He tapped the bourbon bottle. "Strychnine in the bottle," he said. "That's why I said I had an out. I was perpared for your visit."

And he had offered me a drink from the bottle!

I took a deep breath.

"Perhaps you are suffering too." Brien Medill shrugged. "I don't know."

There is a word for his kind but I am not sure what it is.

"Always the out, remember?" He shuddered. Suddenly he went into convulsions.

"Medill, I wasn't sure it was you! I was even beginning to think I was wrong! It might not have been murder."

His face became distorted. He started to slump. He looked as if his insides were squeezing. Writhing. "But I know—" he whispered.

He disappeared down behind the bar:

"You should always keep an out—handy, Sergeant. Remember that—"

There was a long rattle of breath. Then there was silence. I went behind the bar, stared down on him.

Brien Medill was dead.



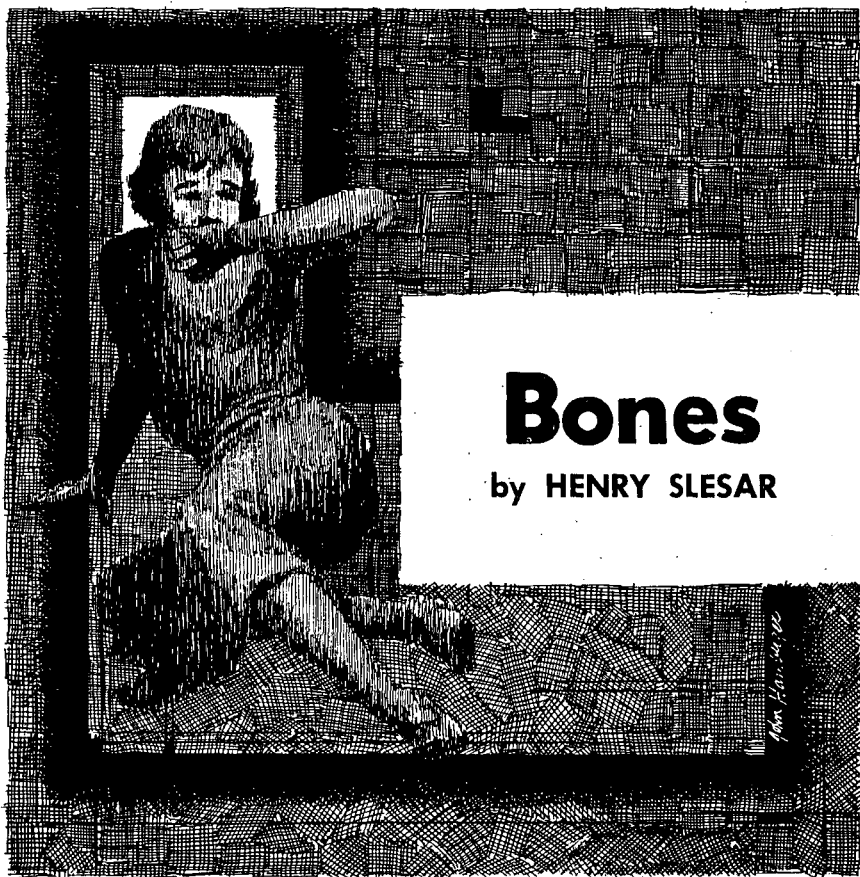
In the Next Issue—Complete and Exclusively Yours—

YOUTH IS FOR DYING

A Thrilling New Mike Shayne Short Novel

By BRETT HALLIDAY

Were they simply wild, lost kids—or were they organized, vicious killers who murdered at will? Mike Shayne did not know the answer. One thing he did know, however. Murder was running wild in the night, the only sure witness was marked for quick death—and his own name was next of those to die. Don't miss this great novel.



Somewhere out there
lay the clue to a riddle.
A riddle only a
dead man could solve.

THE FIGURE trudging up Mrs. Buttolph's gravel driveway was as gawky and flat-footed as a crane. She pulled aside the front-window curtain and watched the stranger approach.

He must have seen her face through the glass; he leaned on his crooked walking stick and waved his arm.

"Well, I never," Mrs. Buttolph said to herself.

It was a tall man in khaki shorts that barely covered his knobby knees. There was a Sam Browne belt around his waist, jangling with metal objects. There was a large parcel tied to the end of his stick. When he was near enough to permit close scrutiny, she saw that he wore thick-lensed eyeglasses propped on the bridge of a long, sharp nose.

She was at the door before he could knock twice.

"Yes?" Mrs. Buttolph said. "Were you looking for someone, sir?"

"Mrs. Buttolph?" He swept off his wide-brimmed khaki hat and grinned. "How do you do? My name's Purdy, Oscar Purdy, of the American Geographic. May I come in a moment?"

She hesitated, but stepped aside.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Purdy?"

"A lot. Quite a lot," he chuckled.

"May I sit down?"

"Of course."

He collapsed into the big wing chair by the fireplace and slapped his hands on his bare knees.

"Well," he said amiably, "I'm certainly glad to find you home. You've been gone quite a while, haven't you?"

"Three months. I was in Europe."

"Yes, so I understand. You can't

imagine how I've been looking forward to your return. As a matter of fact, so has the whole Society—American Geographic, that is. You've heard of us, I trust."

"I'm not sure," Mrs. Buttolph said. "It sounds vaguely familiar."

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to sell you anything." He laughed. "No, Mrs. Buttolph, the favor you can do us is far more valuable than money. You can help us in an extremely important archeological study we're undertaking—as a matter of fact, you're the only one who can help us, it seems."

Mrs. Buttolph, a matronly woman of fifty, looked dismayed at his words. She took the chair at the opposite end of the fireplace, and folded her plump hands in her lap.

"I don't understand. What can I do?"

"I'll start at the beginning," Purdy said, placing his walking stick on the carpet. "You see, a few months ago, an interesting discovery was made around Croton, by an excavating crew. They unearthed some stone artifacts which indicated that this area may be a rich source of prehistoric fossils."

"As a result, some of our people have been digging in the vicinity. I'm the only one who's had any real luck, but I'm afraid that I've been trespassing on your acreage." He lowered his gaze apologetically. Mrs. Buttolph's hand toyed with the high collar of her dress.

"I still don't know what you

mean. You've been digging on my property?"

"Only back in the woods, of course. But after two months of search, at last I was rewarded. I found bones!"

"Bones?" Mrs. Buttolph said.

"Yes! Isn't that wonderful? Of course, I can't identify their age or origin; I'm strictly an amateur. But they're in remarkably good condition." He reached down, and unknotted the parcel attached to his stick. "Here," he said, "just have a look at this.

He held up an object, and Mrs. Buttolph yelped.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Purdy said. "I didn't mean to distress you. It's only a leg bone of course; I've found a skull, too. From what little I know of anatomy, they seem to have belonged to a rather short, stocky man; perhaps a neanderthal, or even a Cro-magon. I'm very excited about the discovery, as you can imagine."

Mrs. Buttolph looked faint.

"I'm sure I can reconstruct the entire skeleton," Purdy said avidly, "if you'll permit me to continue my digging around your place. Just think of what it would mean to science!"

"No," the woman said. "No, you can't do that."

Purdy's face fell.

"But Mrs. Buttolph, you can't make me stop now. Surely you can see the value of my find. I admit it was rather unethical, digging on your land while you were gone. But in the interest of science—"

"I don't want you to dig here!" the woman said shrilly. "You don't have any right!"

"No, of course not. But I thought—" Purdy looked glum. "Mrs. Buttolph, could I speak to your husband about this?"

"I have no husband. I'm a widow."

"Oh," the man said, crestfallen. "I'm sorry." He sighed, and stood up. "Well, you're entitled to throw me off, of course. It's your property. But I had such high hopes—"

He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Well, I'd better get started. I still have to see Lieutenant Schuyler—"

"Who?"

"Lieutenant Schuyler, of the police department. It's some silly ordinance they have here; any discovery the Society makes must first be examined by the police authorities, particularly human remains. Ridiculous, of course. I can't imagine why the police should be interested in fossils."

He hoisted his stick and started for the door. Mrs. Buttolph said:

"Wait, Mr. Purdy."

"Yes?"

"You—you're going to take those bones to the police?"

"Yes, I must. I was waiting until I completed my excavating, but I suppose that's all I'm going to do now."

"Won't you—won't you have something first? A cold drink, perhaps?"

Purdy reflected. "That might be

an idea. It's been a long, dusty walk."

"I'll get you something," Mrs. Buttolph said.

With a sigh, the man returned to his seat. When the woman left, he took a small skull out of his knapsack and studied it mournfully.

She returned five minutes later with a tall frosted glass on a tray. She stared when she saw the skull, and Purdy quickly replaced it in his parcel. Then he took the drink from her hand and sniffed it.

"Hmm," he said. "Arsenic. Very difficult to disguise the odor, Mrs. Buttolph."

"What?"

"Was that what you gave your husband? Or did you rely on the old blunt instrument?"

Her eyes rounded. "I don't know what you're talking about—"

He removed a flask from his belt and poured the contents of the glass

into it. Then he corked and replaced it.

"Who are you?" Mrs. Buttolph said.

"Garson's my name," the man said cheerfully. "I'm an investigator for National Mutual, Mrs. Buttolph—the insurance company that just financed your European trip. You see, I was never satisfied with your husband's mysterious disappearance, not in all these years.

"Unfortunately, I hit upon this idea too late to prevent payment of the money. But better late than never, eh, Mrs. Buttolph?" He smiled ingratiatingly, and got to his feet.

"The bones—" the woman said hoarsely staring at the parcel on his walking stick.

"Borrowed from a medical school," the man said. "We'll dig up the real ones some other time."

"You'll be hearing from us." He whistled as he walked down the drive.



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